

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SPINNING NARRATIVES ACROSS
POLITICAL DIVIDES: HARNESSING THE
CULTURAL POWER OF A STORY WELL-
TOLD

Ashley Glacel, Doctor of Philosophy, 2016

Dissertation directed by: Professor Sheri L. Parks, Department of
American Studies

This dissertation explores how two American storytellers, considered by many to be exemplary in their craft, rely on narrative strategies to communicate to their audiences on divisive political topics in a way that both invokes feelings of pleasure and connection and transcends party identification and ideological divides. Anna Quindlen, through her political columns and op-eds, and Aaron Sorkin, through his television show *The West Wing*, have won over a politically diverse fan base in spite of the fact that their writing espouses liberal political viewpoints. By telling stories that entertain, first and foremost, Quindlen and Sorkin are able to have a material impact on their audiences on both dry and controversial topics, accomplishing that which 19th Century writer and activist Harriet Farley made her practice: writing in such a way to gain the access necessary to “do good by stealth.” This dissertation will argue that it is their skilled use of storytelling elements, which capitalize on the cultural relationship humans have with storytelling, that

enables Quindlen and Sorkin to achieve this. The dissertation asks: How do stories shape the beliefs, perspectives, and cognitive functions of humans? How do stories construct culture and interact with cultural values? What is the media's role in shaping society? What gives stories their power to unite as a medium? What is the significance of the experience of reading or hearing a well-told story, of how it feels? What are the effects of Quindlen's and Sorkin's writing on audience members and the political world at large? What is lost when a simplistic narrative structure is followed? Who is left out and what is overlooked? The literature that informs the answers to these questions will cross over and through several academic disciplines: American Studies, British Cultural Studies, Communication, Folklore, Journalism, Literature, Media Studies, Popular Culture, and Social Psychology. The chapters will also explore scholarship on the subjects of narratology and schema theory.

SPINNING NARRATIVES ACROSS POLITICAL DIVIDES:
HARNESSING THE CULTURAL POWER OF A STORY WELL-TOLD

by

Ashley Glacel

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Sheri L. Parks, Chair
Professor Emeritus James F. Klumpp
Professor Trevor Parry-Giles
Professor Nancy L. Struna
Professor Psyche Williams-Forsen

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Dedication

For my parents – AVG.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Anna Quindlen Case Study	39
Chapter Three: Anna Quindlen Case Study	66
Chapter Four: <i>The West Wing</i> Case Study	116
Chapter Five: <i>The West Wing</i> Case Study	175
Chapter Six: Conclusion	233
Coda	244
Appendix A	249
Appendix B	253
Works Cited	256

“The world’s priests and shamans knew what psychology would later confirm:
if you want a message to burrow into a human mind, work it into a story.”
Jonathan Gottschall¹

CHAPTER ONE

How does it feel when you finish a book? A really good one? When the things you wished for the characters have happened, they have learned something and you have learned something, and you feel hopeful for the future that lays before them? How does it feel when you have reached the end of a movie? When the credits roll and the house lights come up, and you are either crying, laughing, clapping, or doing all three at once? When the caliber of the movie earns critical and popular acclaim and wins Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards?

Whether through books, movies, conversations, articles, podcasts, or any other type of expression, stories dominate human lives. Humans communicate through stories, teach through stories, entertain through stories, and document through stories. Stories are so prevalent as to be run-of-the-mill; except when they are not, because sometimes they are extraordinary – extraordinarily told, extraordinarily written – extraordinary enough to evoke the kind of feelings that a really good storyteller gives the audience.

When one reaches the end of that kind of story, there is more than a feeling of affirmation toward the conclusion; there is emotional satisfaction and emotional understanding. There is also a feeling of pleasure, a feeling of connection, and a feeling of catharsis. Those feelings are powerful and work to amplify the message and intensify the impact of the storyteller. This dissertation will explore how two American storytellers, considered by many in their audience to be exemplary in their craft, have

¹ Jonathon Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York Mariner Books, 2013), 118

relied on narrative strategies to communicate to their audience on divisive political topics in a way that both invokes feelings of pleasure and connection and transcends party identification and ideological divides. Anna Quindlen, through her political columns and op-eds, and Aaron Sorkin, through his television show *The West Wing*, have won over a politically diverse fan base in spite of the fact that their writing espouses liberal political viewpoints. By telling stories that entertain, first and foremost, Quindlen and Sorkin are able to have a material impact on their audiences on both dry and controversial topics, accomplishing that which 19th Century writer and activist Harriet Farley made her practice: writing in such a way to gain the access necessary to “do good by stealth.” This dissertation will argue that it is their skilled use of storytelling elements, which capitalize on the cultural relationship humans have with storytelling, that enables Quindlen and Sorkin to achieve this.

Project Foundations

All sorts of academic inferences and research questions could be and, frankly, have been queried on the topic of storytelling as a type of political communication. The subject is not new and it is likely not even close to exhaustion as an area of scholarly investigation. Further, neither is the subject of political communication and the role played by emotion. For the better part of the last century, communication scholars have attempted to codify, quantify, and recreate in laboratory settings the emotions invoked by political narratives. They have sought to map them, graph them, direct them, and designate them. That is not what this project seeks to replicate or approximate.

The emotions that Quindlen and Sorkin evoke are of interest, and they are what the audience members often articulate when discussing the hallmarks of these storytellers. To Quindlen's readers and Sorkin's viewers, the emotions evoked by their stories are ephemeral, internal, and personal. They are intangible. However, the implications of these intangible feelings are real and have material effects on the lives of their readers and, at times, the greater political landscape in America. The triggering of these emotions is one step in a process that is the greater interest of this dissertation: the process wherein Quindlen and Sorkin utilize certain narrative strategies to win over readers or viewers who do not necessarily share their political views. Also of interest are what material implications the process may have beyond the moment of storytelling.

If this still sounds like a project that belongs under the rubric of Communication – either rhetorical or quantitative – perhaps it could be. The element that makes it pertinent, if not at home, under the rubric of American Studies is the focus this project is taking on the role of culture's relationship with storytelling, and the premise that it is this relationship that enables storytellers to skillfully communicate across ideological divides on ideologically divisive topics using various narrative strategies. This cultural relationship that humans have with storytelling is what allows Quindlen and Sorkin to engross their audiences, target the values of their audiences, and engage in an ongoing dialogue with their large, politically diverse audience. Therefore, it will form the basis for and provide the perspective from which this inquiry will consider the writing of Anna Quindlen and Aaron Sorkin.

Questions

Given the project's interest in culture's relationship with storytelling, the first questions to be raised will be related to that focus. This chapter will set the stage with an overview of how scholars have come to define culture, in ways both canonical and modern. It will inquire about the roles of stories within cultures and the roles of stories within the daily lives of humans. How do stories shape the beliefs, perspectives, and cognitive functions of humans? How do stories construct culture and interact with cultural values?

Within the chapters to follow, additional questions will be situated where they are most relevant and interrogated alongside the case studies. These include: What is the media's role in shaping society? What gives stories their power to unite as a medium? What is the significance of the experience of reading or hearing a well-told story, of how it feels? As Quindlen's columns and Sorkin's *The West Wing* are analyzed, this scholar will ask: What are the specific storytelling strategies they use to engage a politically diverse audience? What are the effects of their writing on audience members and the political world at large?

The literature that informs the answers to these questions will cross over and through several academic disciplines: American Studies, British Cultural Studies, Communication, Folklore, Journalism, Literature, Media Studies, Popular Culture, and Social Psychology. The chapters will explore and explain scholarship on the subjects of narratology and schema theory. The question that will conclude each case study has strong roots in American Studies, which prioritizes a reflexive and inclusive scholarly

approach. That question is: What is lost when a simplistic narrative structure is followed? Who is left out and what is overlooked?

Culture and Cultures: An American Studies Approach

In preparation for a discussion of humans' cultural relationship with storytelling, this section will provide an overview of how and why culture is studied, and how culture is and has been defined within American Studies and related fields. In American Studies, the epistemology of culture has been shaped by and has formed concurrently alongside the field's desire to both define what "culture" is and explain the cultures that scholars encounter. Gene Wise elaborates on this desire, describing it as "the urge to impose form upon experience... to *explain* things, to make one's own experience, and the world around that experience, comprehensible."² Raymond Williams, a British Cultural Studies scholar, writes that he found himself seeking a "clarification of a particular way of life" and the discovery of "certain general 'laws' or 'trends,' by which social and cultural development as a whole can be better understood."³ In Michel de Certeau's study of the "indirect" or "errant" trajectories of everyday life, he insisted that "there must be a logic of these practices."⁴ In sum, all of these scholars seem to believe that cultures are not simply random chaos, but rather that there is something to be found in their patterns. A similar desire – to find patterns and logic in the experience of storytelling – informs this dissertation's approach to the practice and its place in and effect on culture.

² Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement" (1979) in Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 175-6

³ Raymond Williams, "The Analysis of Culture," in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1994; England: 2nd ed., 1998), 49

⁴ Michel de Certeau, "The Practice of Everyday Life," in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1994; England: 2nd ed., 1998), 486, 488

The challenge to define “culture” has long occupied many of the scholars within the American Studies canon. Henry Nash Smith, a preeminent scholar within the myth-symbol school, defines culture as “the way in which subjective experience is organized.”⁵ Folklorist Henry Glassie describes it as “an arrangement of ideas, a cognitive structure of generative principles, whirring and grinding in tension.”⁶ Anthropologist Clifford Geertz states that, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”⁷ Put more simply, Glassie asserts that “meaning is the center of study” of culture.⁸ This search for meaning has occupied generations of scholars, both within the field of cultural studies and those from without.⁹

The compulsion to explain cultures can be seen in the earliest iterations of American Studies, as well as in writings about America before the discipline was formed. In *Letters From An American Farmer*, written in 1782 by J. Hector St. Jean De Crevecoeur, the author describes Scottish and English immigrants, among others, conveying a curiosity about why people from different geographic regions are the way they are, and what it all means.¹⁰ Geertz contends that “cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from

⁵ Henry Nash Smith, “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?” (1957) in Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1

⁶ Henry Glassie, “Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact’s Place in American Studies,” *Prospects* 3 (1977), 16

⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5

⁸ Glassie, 2

⁹ Wise, 179-180

¹⁰ J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, “Letter III: What is an American?,” *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782), 84

the better guesses.”¹¹ Williams spent time parsing the meaning of culture as separate from “society,”¹² while fellow British cultural theorist Stuart Hall asserted that “no single, unproblematic definition of ‘culture’ is to be found.” Though their descriptions of culture differ, all of these scholars believe it does take some form, and one’s culture or cultures bear influence on a person’s identity. In the opinion of this scholar, stories are one of the more direct and identifiable avenues through which cultures influence their inhabitants.

Just as there were many ways to define culture, there have been many theoretical approaches to explaining it, and American Studies has been influenced by a number of them. The myth-symbol school used an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary studies and history in order to explore the relationship between material culture and the cultures that produce it.¹³ This approach has not been abandoned, rather refined. Glassie contends that “the dynamics of ambiguity, spontaneity, and metaphor allow artworks...to deliver messages from deep in the psyche—messages that cannot be reduced to clear discourse or data or statistical summary. ‘If I could say it,’ said Isadora Duncan, ‘I would not have to dance it.’”¹⁴ Using material forms of expression that might “deliver messages from deep within the psyche,” scholars such as Smith, Leo Marx, and Alan Trachtenberg worked to pin down a “collective imagination” that could serve to explain how Americans behave.¹⁵

Cultural theorists, beginning with structuralists, helped solidify the study of culture at the forefront of American Studies. Ferdinand Saussure sought to create a

¹¹ Geertz, 20

¹² Williams, *Culture*, 79

¹³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, & Sherry B. Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 522; Bruce, 83

¹⁴ Glassie, 6

¹⁵ Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies” (1972) in Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 73

science of language in order to explain human behavior, believing that all human activities could be interpreted as signs.¹⁶ In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann assert that humans create these symbols together so that they can understand each other's worlds. While structuralism was not inculcated into American Studies, it laid the foundation for poststructuralism, which has had an enormous influence on the field. In contrast to structuralism, poststructuralism posits that cultural meaning cannot be determined scientifically, because the signs people use to communicate are neither stable nor absolute. Some poststructuralists utilize deconstruction, believing that there always exists a multiplicity of layered, referential meanings. Derrida, often credited with the conceiving of deconstruction, said that, "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things."¹⁷ This perspective expands the exploration from focusing not only on the relationship between material culture and the cultures that produce it, but also the cultures that receive it. For instance, while this project is interested in the intents and products of the storytellers it examines, it is equally as interested in the effects their stories have on audiences.

British Cultural Studies grounds its search for meaning with material considerations, in a way that does not abandon poststructuralism altogether. Like 19th century scholar Matthew Arnold before him, Williams takes culture to be a work in progress, or a "common growth" in art and moral concerns.¹⁸ And like the poststructuralists, Williams prioritizes the study of relationships in his quest to explain

¹⁶ John G. Blair, "Structuralism, American Studies, and the Humanities," *American Quarterly* 30 (1978), 267

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), in Alan Bass, ed., *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278

¹⁸ Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy," in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1994; England: 2nd ed., 1998); Williams, *Culture*, 49

cultural history.¹⁹ Perhaps Williams' most notable contribution was his description of a "structure of feeling," which he defined as the "sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living."²⁰

For this project, it is Williams' definition of culture – along with that of fellow British Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall – that will be most useful. As a parental culture, the British viewpoint is relevant to the American viewpoint, and as a discipline, British cultural studies and American Studies have had a mutually influential relationship and developed along a very similar trajectory. In *The Analysis of Culture*, Williams defines culture in three ways. First, culture is defined as a reflection of humanity's highest ideals and shared values, as well as the continual process humans undertake to attain a perfect state of being in which their actions match these values as closely as possible. To analyze culture under this definition is to attempt to uncover the universal values a society reveres as a collective. Williams' second definition of culture conceives it as the physical, intellectual, and artistic products a society generates. To analyze this type of culture is to scrutinize these outputs as documentation of human experience, thought, and values at a certain time and place.

Finally, Williams offers a third definition – the "social definition" – which incorporates the previous two: "culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior."²¹ To analyze a culture under the social definition is to clarify

¹⁹ Williams, *Culture*, 52

²⁰ Williams, *Culture*, 52; parts of the preceding section are based on an excerpt from Ashley Glacel, "American Studies History & Theory Comprehensive Exam." University of Maryland, 2010.

²¹ Williams, 48

what these meanings and values are. Hall, in his definition of culture, focuses on the meanings and values as they are derived from the way in which a society responds to and interacts with the material and historical conditions of their world. For him, culture is defined both as those meanings and values, and also as the shared practices and conditions that embody and express them – practices such as storytelling, for instance.²² This project will rely on Hall’s definition and Williams’ third definition for its consideration of humans’ cultural relationship to storytelling, an approach which, as stated, incorporates features of his first two definitions. References to culture or cultures will imply the collective way a particular subset of society tends to live, act, and think as based on that group’s overlapping values and priorities.

Story Within Cultures, Culture Within Stories

What is a story? Stories are variable, malleable entities that can take an array of shapes and communicate myriad occurrences. A story is defined herein as the telling of events that are related to each other and hold bearing on one another. Stories often convey a complication or an unexpected happening that has been deemed worthy of note by the teller, and conclude with a resolution of the complication or reflection on the unexpected occurrence. A well-constructed story offers its audience a sense of closure and feeling of satisfaction.²³

²² Hall, *Paradigms*, 527

²³ Ruth E. Page, *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9-10, 193; Marie-Laure Ryan, “Digital Media,” in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 331-2; parts of the preceding section are based on an excerpt from Ashley Glacel, “Storytelling as a Persuasive Tool for Online Activism.” University of Maryland, 2012.

One of the ways humans construct culture – its boundaries, its ideal, its values – is through the stories they tell. Stories are a type of selective tradition, whether written, spoken, or performed, that absorb aspects of the culture in which they are created and are therefore reflective of that culture.²⁴ They are not a replica of culture, rather an interpretation, and each one may only reveal a small portion of a culture as it exists.²⁵ From the moment humans are born, they hear stories that communicate morals, lessons, and traditions, teaching them how to operate and interact, and within what limitations.²⁶

As culture is revealed through stories, so it is also created and recreated. The lessons are internalized by anyone exposed to them and then reinforced each time a person tells a story as part of everyday communication. Crafting stories in this mold does not need to be purposeful, and often it is not. As stories are crafted, humans will – either consciously or subconsciously – reify and underscore cultural values as they mimic the story structures and themes to which they have been exposed throughout their lives.²⁷ This is because humans are inundated with stories day in and day out, rendering their use and form familiar – second-nature even.²⁸ An understanding of this phenomenon is vital to this project, as it serves as the reasoning behind many of the arguments that will be made going forth.

²⁴ Williams, *Culture*, 54; Hall, *Paradigms*, 525, quoting Williams: “We cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice...”

²⁵ Williams, *Culture*, 56

²⁶ Gottschall, 28

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Jean Matter Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 48

²⁸ Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), xi

What Stories Do for Humans

Stories function in a number of ways as humans encounter them daily and continually. As both a form of communication and an entity with a recognizable, typical structure, stories help humans relate to life broadly and to each other specifically. Scholar Jack Lule contends that the trajectory of a human life models the structure of a story, punctuated throughout by several universal experiences and circumstances: birth, infancy, the support and creation of families, and death.²⁹ Similarly, Walter Fisher, a communication scholar with a particular interest in narrative, maintains that humans “experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends.”³⁰

Robert McKee, an author and screenwriting instructor, posits that a human’s “appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living.”³¹ Stories can help humans organize their experiences and make sense of them, providing a feeling of stability in the face of uncertainty.³² For instance, when confronting an unfamiliar situation or struggle, a person can rely on what he or she has learned from stories and story structure to categorize the unfamiliar occurrence alongside more familiar encounters and even predict how the interaction will play out and conclude. It is this function that spurs humans’ desire to consume more stories.³³ Stories explain how the world works, and therefore make it seem as if it is possible to foresee outcomes

²⁹ Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 4, 30

³⁰ Fisher, 24

³¹ Robert McKee, *Story* (New York: ReganBooks, 1997), 12

³² Lule, 194, 43; Gottschall, 103-4

³³ Gottschall, 17

in everyday life. In this way, stories can be conceptualized by those they comfort as a sort of oracle or revelation of human destiny.³⁴

Stories can also provide a respite from the struggles and complications of day-to-day living: as a form of entertainment, they can offer an escape. With a structure that can easily gloss over or omit inconvenient details, ensuring a fulfilling and airtight conclusion, the simplicity of stories provides an enticing contrast to life.³⁵ Perhaps this reveals a bit of self-sought delusion on the part of humans, but that is precisely why stories are reassuring. The audience knows that the happy ending of a story may be unlikely, yet the “transcendence of the universal tragedy of man,” as described by Joseph Campbell, is nevertheless what humans seek, particularly in Western societies.³⁶ People understand that while death is an inevitable truth, stories have the sole ability to defy it.³⁷

Stories arouse emotion and infuse emotion with meaning, adding weight to day-to-day actions.³⁸ The feelings and thoughts triggered by stories mirror those that are experienced in everyday life and serve to increase awareness of one’s relationship to them.³⁹ In this fashion, stories enable readers and audience members to better understand themselves and the greater world.⁴⁰ While stories inspire feelings related to the story’s subject matter – whether those be joy, apprehension, sorrow, anticipation, et cetera – stories also inspire feelings separate from a narrative’s specific plot points and character

³⁴ R. McKee, 43

³⁵ Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 7

³⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (California: New World Library, 2008), 19, 21; Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 24-5

³⁷ Lule, 22

³⁸ R. McKee, 12, 25, 111

³⁹ R. McKee, 111; parts of the preceding section adapted from Ashley Glacel, “Storytelling as a Persuasive Tool: A Case Study of Anna Quindlen’s Columns for *Newsweek*.” University of Maryland, 2011.

⁴⁰ Fisher, 13

arcs. For instance, stories make humans feel stable, as mentioned previously, by providing insight and offering comfort in an unstable world. Stories make humans feel confident because they are familiar, and the audience can feel secure about how a story might conclude and consequently feel pleased with themselves for having forecast the finish. And stories make humans feel satisfied, because the as audience members they endure the suspense and rising complication and are rewarded with an ending that they have been culturally programmed to perceive as just and that leaves no questions unanswered.

Humans' robust cultural relationship to stories affects not only what humans feel, but also how they think. Humans have a substantial intellectual and cognitive relationship to storytelling, and specifically to story structure. Lule states that by virtue of their familiarity, stories help people organize information in the face of data overload.⁴¹ How do they do so? Schema theory, a psychological theory, seeks to provide an answer. Schema theory recognizes the prevalence of stories and storytelling throughout cultures and investigates how the ways in which stories are structured impact human cognitive processes. Schema theory holds that there are precise rules that govern story structure. It is humans' implicit knowledge of these rules that not only allows an audience to follow a story and "fill in" the blanks as it is told, but also to organize information and daily experiences intellectually.⁴² Knowledge of story structure is ingrained from a very early age; schema theorists maintain that even young children demonstrate an understanding of story structure. Research shows that when they are offered only part of a story and then prompted to complete it, children will obey the rules

⁴¹ Lule, 199

⁴² Mandler, 17-18

of story structure in doing so.⁴³ A body of scholarly data to support schema theory exists and is explored in the following section.

The Role of Schema Theory

What enables the influential power of stories? Narrative as a type of communication can be powerful because humans have a strong intellectual and cognitive relationship to storytelling, and specifically to story structure. Schema theory is a psychological theory that recognizes the prevalence of stories and storytelling in human cultures and investigates how the ways in which stories are structured impact our cognitive processes. Its premise is that precise cultural rules govern story structure, and it is a culture's understanding of these rules – whether conscious or subconscious – that allow one to follow a story as it is told and “fill in” the blanks where necessary. Knowledge of these rules also enables humans to cognitively organize information and daily experiences.⁴⁴

Jean Matter Mandler explains that due to the rigid nature of Western narrative structure, it has been relatively easy for scholars to codify it and, further, attempt to uncover it working within humans' knowledge systems.⁴⁵ The structure that humans encounter in their environment is learned, creating a reflective mental structure that influences the ways in which one extracts and processes information of all kinds. Schema theorists posit that by studying the structure found in the cultural environment, humans can better understand the schemas they rely on cognitively.⁴⁶ Therefore,

⁴³ Ibid., 48

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17-18

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18

⁴⁶ Ibid., 113

Mandler defines a story schema as a “mental reflection of the regularities that the processor has discovered (or constructed) through interacting with stories.”⁴⁷

When experiencing stories, an audience is continuously relying on these schemas, employing prior knowledge about the rules of stories in order to connect various parts of the story to one another and to anticipate the path of the story. The audience also relies on “scripts” and “scenes” to flesh out the story. Scripts are defined within psychological study as familiar acts, events, and rituals that occur in daily life, such as making dinner, commuting to work, running errands, or taking a shower. Scenes are defined as the spaces and places within which these routines take place.⁴⁸ These routines and settings do not always require elaborate description within a story because scripts and scenes are activated cognitively, reminding audience members of how these typical events generally unfold or what certain sets tend to look like.⁴⁹ Listeners, viewers, and readers are able to infer what the storyteller does not explicitly state, allowing the pace of the story to continue at an energetic clip without getting bogged down with details that are assumed to be understood.

Cognitively, humans use story structure for several intellectual exercises including the organization and configuration of information, memorization, and sense-making. Schema theorists contend that the brain seeks structure within the information it encounters, whether the structure is inherent or imposed.⁵⁰ Story schema, script, and scene structures organize information that is received in a way that establishes stronger links amongst the individual parts. These types of structures are *collections* of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1, 75

⁴⁹ Ibid., 110-111

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19

information, with multiple part-whole linkages, as opposed to a categorical structure of information, which is more like a cognitive list (e.g., planets in our solar system, types of shellfish).⁵¹ Mandler relates how schematic organizations in the human mind are different from categorical organizations. In a schematic organization, “the items are connected horizontally (serially) as well as vertically (to the whole of which they are a part), and hence form a more tightly interconnected organization.”⁵² For example, a baking sheet, rolling pin, sack of flour, and oven mitts are all linked serially as cooking items. But they are also linked vertically as objects used in the script of baking bread, set in the scene of a typical kitchen.

Scripts also boast temporal relations when the actions they describe typically happen in a certain order. Some parts of the script may cause other parts to happen: the turning of a key starts the car engine in a script about running errands. Some parts simply enable other parts to occur: getting in the car allows one to drive to the dry cleaner’s. Still other temporal relations are merely conventional, though optional. These connections further strengthen the linkages between items in a cognitive script.⁵³

Because of the way story schemas, scripts, and scenes help humans organize information using stronger linkages, they therefore help audience members remember more strongly the information they encounter in a story – or in everyday life – and they assist in memorization and subsequent recall.⁵⁴ In terms of how this relates to a storyteller’s ability to influence her audience, quantitative communication scholars claim that information that is more cognitively accessible has a greater likelihood to influence

⁵¹ Ibid., 1, 14

⁵² Ibid., 14

⁵³ Ibid., 14

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8, 15

behavior.⁵⁵ Therefore, according to schema theory, humans appear to be conditioned (if not hardwired) – both culturally and intellectually – to enjoy, understand, and be influenced by stories.⁵⁶

The field of quantitative communication weighs in on the discussion of schema theory, and it also brings to bear a variety of implications for understanding whether communicators are effective in communicating to their audiences and, if they are, to what degree. Attitude change scholarship enables the consideration of the challenges and advantages related to columnists as sources of information, their readers as subjects, the efficacy of narrative content, and the potential to influence behavior. In terms of the cognitive effects of schema theory, Jenifer E. Kopfman, Sandie W. Smith, James K. Ah Yun, and Annemarie Hodges cite evidence that narrative is not only delivered and processed by humans in its familiar structure, but it is stored and recalled in this form as well. To these scholars, this helps explain why narrative structures can communicate a lot of information very efficiently and enable an audience to quickly make judgments about the scenario described and the actors present therein.⁵⁷

This point links back to the question of how readers cognitively process political columns that rely on narrative strategies. Herbert Bless, Diane M. Mackie, and Norbert Schwarz explore the narrative form's effect on cognitive processing, suggesting that “judgments are more likely to be extreme if they are based on simple knowledge structures and schemata rather than on more complex knowledge structures.” One reason

⁵⁵ R. H. Fazio, M. C. Powell, and C. J. Williams. “The Role of Attitude Accessibility in the Attitude-to-Behavior Process,” *The Journal of Consumer Research* 16 (1989), 280-288

⁵⁶ *The Sociolinguistics of Narrative*, Ed. Joanna Thornborrow, Jennifer Coates, Amsterdam (Philadelphia, J. Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 2; Gottschall, 56

⁵⁷ J. E. Kopfman, Smith, S. W., Ah Yun, J. K., & Hodges, A. (1998). Affective and cognitive reactions to narrative versus statistical evidence organ donation messages. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 26, 281-2

for this, they maintain, is because simple structures and schemata allow individuals to rely on heuristic cues, or mental frameworks that allow for cognitive shortcuts, therefore using fewer dimensions in formulating the judgment and making it more likely that competing information will be left out of the formulation.⁵⁸

On the other hand, Monique Mitchell's research finds that attitudes that have been formulated as a result of heuristic processing tend to be less stable and resistant to counterarguments, as well as less likely to predict actual behavior.⁵⁹ This counters what Dean Kazoleas determined in earlier studies, that narrative arguments tend to result in attitude change that is more persistent over time, and that they are more available to the subject in terms of later recall.⁶⁰ Quantitative communication is still a relatively young field, its methodologies and approaches changing with each passing decade, so studies with contradicting results are not uncommon. Therefore, though quantitative communication research raises many interesting questions, it seems to offer few definitive answers as to whether political columnists can influence their audience, and what impact their narrative strategies have on such a goal.

Stories and Cultural Values

Stories impact what humans feel, how they think, and perhaps most significantly, what they believe. As shown in the earlier discussion of how one might define the term *culture*, culture and cultural values are nearly one and the same. Values are the basis of

⁵⁸ H. Bless, Mackie, D. M., & Schwarz, N., "Mood effects on attitude judgments: Independent effects of mood before and after message elaboration," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63 (1992), 590.

⁵⁹ Monique M. Mitchell, "Motivated, but not able? The effects of positive and negative mood on persuasive message processing," *Communication Monographs*, 67 (2000) 216.

⁶⁰ D. C. Kazoleas, "A comparison of the persuasive effectiveness of qualitative versus quantitative evidence: A test of explanatory hypotheses." *Communication Quarterly*, 1993, 41

any culture; they are the common denominator out of which lived experience and material creations are produced.⁶¹ A culture's values are its priorities, its determination of what is "fair," those traits that are to be esteemed, and those actions that are to be considered exemplary. It should be emphasized here that values are not always positive. Values can promote violence, discrimination, and limit autonomy. Stories, as a reflection of culture, both express and reinforce a culture's values. Through this interdependent relationship with values, storytelling creates cultures, sustains cultures, and replicates cultures. With each telling and retelling, stories teach societies their values and justify the actions humans are urged to take based on those values.

It is important for the purposes of this research endeavor to remember that within a specific society, values are seemingly universal and immutable. Members of a culture or subculture typically do not think of their culture's values as "*our* values," they often think of them as *the* values. As such, these values do not seem malleable or constructed, rather they seem to be concrete and to have always been.⁶² This is why the beliefs of competing subcultures can seem so foreign, and why intersectionality – or one's belonging to more than one subculture – can be so vexing. There are certain types of stories, called myths, which can be described in the same way: they seem to have always been. Myths are a traditional story or legend, the origin of which is often unknown and may have no basis in truth but, like values, seem concrete and immutable. Lule argues that myths are influential because their telling makes them seem true and irrefutable:

⁶¹ Hall, *Paradigms*, 527

⁶² Lule, 183

“The stories of myth are not supposed to be understood as myth; they are supposed to seem real and natural.”⁶³

Myths are a prime example of how stories can shape, maintain, and target values. Myths work to enforce cultural boundaries, with specific mythic tropes urging members of a society to conform.⁶⁴ For instance, the Scapegoat myth draws negative attention to those who rebel against the social order.⁶⁵ It achieves this by deriding the character that is acting out of line, minimizing the issues with society that were raised by the character, and issuing warnings to those who might decide to act in a similar manner.⁶⁶ As another example, the Flood myth trope uses acts of God to punish entire societies whose behaviors have strayed from the celebrated norm.⁶⁷

On the other hand, it is possible for myths to encourage members of a society not to conform, but instead to change or evolve. Myths can provide inspiration, unveil “truths,” and motivate action.⁶⁸ In terms of one timeless trope, the Hero’s Quest is typically concerned with a change or transformation following the loss of some stabilizing aspect.⁶⁹ This change or transformation can be of either an individual or society, and it tends to require the breaking down of barriers in order to put life back into balance.⁷⁰ The Hero’s Quest will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

For the most part, however, myths justify and support the dominant ethos of a culture or subculture. If a society is founded upon inequality, that society’s most

⁶³ Ibid., 118; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 49

⁶⁴ Lule, 23, quoting Joseph Campbell

⁶⁵ Ibid., 63

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79

⁶⁷ Ibid., 173

⁶⁸ R. McKee, 13; Lule, 192

⁶⁹ Lule, 88; Campbell, 81

⁷⁰ R. McKee, 192

established myths “explain” and support such inequality. For example, if a society denies women the opportunity to work or to participate in politics, myths will be told that justify the exclusion and resolve this opposition between men and women. Myths will portray the weakness of women and the superiority of men, making patriarchy seem natural and not like the cultural construction that it is.⁷¹ Similarly, myths can explain away the inconsistency between the values held by a society. For instance, a culture can revere the values of charity, equality, capitalism, and slavery all at the same time because the culture’s prevalent narratives will reconcile the contradiction.⁷²

Myths – as with values – are not always positive, but they do convey a great deal about a culture, and that is why the very earliest American Studies scholars were eager to interrogate them. Known now as the myth-symbol paradigm, its early twentieth-century practitioners used an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary studies and history in order to explore the relationship between material culture and the culture that produces it.⁷³ Though the myth-symbol approach has evolved in ways that allow for a far greater multiplicity of identities and experiences, and a more nuanced conception of the dynamic relationship between producer, consumer, and culture, it is still relevant in the field today and is applicable to this project in particular.

By shaping cultural values, stories teach humans who they are and how to behave. Stories cultivate and defend a society’s beliefs and moral positions in a way that makes it seem as if they are absolute and unchangeable, rather than constructed and malleable.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lule, 145

⁷² Sheri L. Parks, *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2010).

⁷³ Kuklick, 83

⁷⁴ Russell Bentley, “Rhetorical Democracy,” in Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, & Gary Remer, eds., *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric & Democracy* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 130

Stories restrain and contain humans within cultural limits, yet can also at times spur cultural progress and instigate the evolution of a society.⁷⁵

Storytelling Through Popular Culture

Stories, cultures, values – the discussion of these concepts has been academic, theoretical, and based on ideas and notions. What, then, might be the material manifestations of stories that shape and are shaped by a culture and its values? Popular culture in its many iterations has become the main mode of public storytelling in modern times. People encounter storytelling in the form of movies, television, songs, magazines, books, radio, comics, blogs, memes, and so on. Both as cultural products and as a scholarly field, popular culture has come a long way in terms of acceptance from the greater academic community since F.R. Leavis was writing about it over 80 years ago. Leavis's piece, "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," gives an idea of the one-sided view that dominated the initial scholarship surrounding popular culture. Published in 1930, the piece laments that low culture, or commercial culture, has overtaken high culture because it is consumed unthinkingly by the uneducated majority.⁷⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, writing about the "culture industry" in 1944, agreed with Leavis's contention that when it comes to mass culture, the audience is passive and asserts no will of its own. Part of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer refuted any defense of popular culture, based on their argument that it is designed in direct response to the needs and desires of consumers.⁷⁷ In particular, they find fault with the

⁷⁵ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 442-443

⁷⁶ F. R. Leavis, "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1994; England: 2nd ed., 1998)

⁷⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993).

use of standard structures – including narrative structure – across many forms of popular culture, decrying that they render the consumer experience automatic and expected. In the chapters to follow, this dissertation will explore the concept of narrative structure more fully, to include the role it plays in setting up and fulfilling audience expectations. However, it is helpful to point out here that, as one of the primary vehicles for storytelling in modern times, many forms of popular culture incorporate narrative structure.

Walter Fisher has theorized about what he calls the “master metaphor” of narrative, which combines elements of reason, common sense, and myth. The master metaphor is at work in politics, philosophy, literature, and popular culture.⁷⁸ While Adorno and Horkheimer condemn formulaic narrative, stating that it removes spontaneity from the consumer’s experience, Lawrence Levine defends the effectiveness of that which is communicated by popular culture, both due to and in spite of narrative formulas, writing that “even the most solidly formulaic elements of popular culture have their satisfactions for the audience and their value for scholars.”⁷⁹ Film scholar David Bordwell, too, defends narrative structure, declaring that “the classical [narrative] system is not simpleminded,” rather it is quite a complex undertaking to cue viewers to form certain hypotheses that will induce suspense and result in a meaningful and satisfying payoff.⁸⁰ Bordwell specifically defends the conventions found in film, saying they are no different than those utilized in other forms of storytelling.

⁷⁸ Fisher, 6; Gottschall, 54-55

⁷⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5, 1992, 1375

⁸⁰ David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures,” in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 30

While more dated and skeptical works such as those from within the Frankfurt School are an important part of the epistemology of popular culture as a discipline, modern scholars tend to credit humans with more agency when theorizing about their consumption of and interaction with different forms of popular culture. Quite importantly for this project, modern scholars also acknowledge that mass culture of any kind has the ability to either inhibit or liberate. In *The Art of Democracy*, Jim Cullen provides a concise history of popular culture in America, concluding that though it has its pitfalls, popular culture nevertheless succeeds in providing the oppressed with a voice and in generating global dialogues. Henry Giroux goes further to maintain film's potential as an educational tool due to its narrative quality. In *Breaking In to the Movies*, Giroux outlines the pedagogical possibilities of narrative in film form, stating that through their narratives, movies possess the ability to influence and educate as they entertain.⁸¹

Complicating the Pop Culture Audience

Popular culture's potential for liberation is made possible because of the way people experience it, mold it for their own purposes, and even produce it themselves. In the early days of American Studies, members of the myth-symbol school including Henry Nash Smith urged others to relate material culture to the "sordid or commonplace facts of everyday life" and also encouraged fellow scholars to consider not only the creators of mass culture, but the audiences toward which mass culture was being aimed.⁸² Mass

⁸¹ Henry Giroux, *Breaking In to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Parts of this section were augmented from Ashley Glacel, "AMST 603 Final Paper." University of Maryland, 2010.

⁸² H. N. Smith, 2, 7

culture has both varied and actual effects on audiences, with audiences interpreting it and manipulating it for their own uses. The work of poststructuralists brought a focus to the disparities between what the creator of material culture intended and what the audience actually takes from it. Both Michel De Certeau and Levine emphasize the ways in which people put folk and popular culture to use in their everyday lives. De Certeau specifically urges the analysis of how people make use of the cultural representations they encounter, including popular culture, referring to this “process of utilization” as a “secondary production.”⁸³ In *The Folklore of Industrial Society*, Levine notes that people actively “refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations.”⁸⁴ Levine implores scholars to explore the meaning created when audiences interact with forms of popular culture, including a look at the processes and rituals that audiences undertake through this engagement.

This dynamic relationship between cultural products and their users, consumers, and audiences evokes an ethos of materiality that is prioritized in American Studies. Many scholarly works within the field call for and incorporate materiality – in terms of material culture, material experience, and material effects – urging the consideration of “the facts people create out of their compound selves” and legitimizing the elevation of experience within scholarship.⁸⁵ Humans experience stories and as audience members they bring in their experiences, identities, and personal histories in order to contextualize and relate to them.

⁸³ de Certeau, 485

⁸⁴ L. Levine, 1373

⁸⁵ Glassie, 26; parts of the preceding section are based on an excerpt from Glacel, American Studies Comprehensive Exam

In terms of Quindlen's and Sorkin's storytelling, who are the humans that are experiencing their stories? Determining who comprises the audiences for each writer is an inexact science, with data available primarily through the businesses that profit from selling advertisements to run alongside or within their work. Such data shows that for both Quindlen and Sorkin, their audience members on aggregate are more affluent than the average American. Quindlen's readers also tend to be older than the average American, and Sorkin's viewers tend to be more educated than the average American television viewer. On the whole, Pew Research Center finds that news magazines such as *Newsweek* have readers who are older and more affluent than the average American.⁸⁶ In 2007, when Quindlen still had her column in the magazine, *Newsweek's* median reader age was 47 and the average reader household income was \$76,590. In comparison, the median age in the American population was 36.7 and the median household income was \$52,175.⁸⁷ In 2001, *Media Life Magazine* reported *The West Wing* as being the only prime-time television show with an average viewer household income above \$70,000 annually.⁸⁸ In addition, the show's viewers boasted more advanced degrees, personal computers, and access to the Internet than any other prime-time television show audience.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ "The State of the News Media 2013: An Annual Report on American Journalism," The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://www.stateofthemediamagazine.org/2013/news-magazines-embracing-their-digital-future/news-magazines-by-the-numbers/>.

⁸⁷ Laura Norén, "Time and Newsweek Circulation Numbers for 2007," Graphic Sociology Blog, August 11, 2010. Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://thesocietypages.org/graphicsociology/2010/08/11/time-and-newsweek-circulation-figures-for-2007/>.

⁸⁸ Gabriel Spitzer, "Rich Are Different. They Watch 'West Wing,'" *Media Life Magazine*, May 14, 2001, Accessed January 28, 2016. http://www.medialifemagazine.com:8080/news2001/may01/may14/1_mon/news2monday.html.

⁸⁹ Heather Richardson Hayton, "The King's Two Bodies," *The West Wing': The American Presidency as Television Drama*, Peter Rollins and John O'Connor, eds. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 77

These data demonstrate a few interesting points regarding age, class, and education levels, but there are many demographic questions left unanswered in the realms of gender, race, geography, ethnicity, sexuality, and other cultural identifiers. Some assumptions could be extrapolated based on the class identifiers, but to do so could potentially silence or discount levels of diversity in readership and viewership that are not laid bare in these statistics.

More specifically, as part of the case studies to be conducted on Quindlen and Sorkin, this dissertation will refer to particular audience members who have voluntarily shared their opinion of these writers on the Internet. Who are these Internet responders who have been moved to publicly post their experiences of and reactions to Quindlen's column and *The West Wing*? In truth, almost nothing is known about them beyond what they share about their identities and lives – whether that be gender, political party, age, occupation, or the like – and none of those admissions are verifiable.

Another set of questions goes beyond those who actually comprise these audiences and focuses on who is *assumed* to comprise them. To whom do Quindlen and Sorkin assume they are telling stories? To whom do they think they are playing? When they reference cultural values and package their political subject matter in the most palatable form possible, whose values are they speaking to and who are assumed to be the arbiters of what is palatable? In the estimation of this scholar, Quindlen seems to be addressing those who are similar to her, as she is writing in the kind of publication that she – if the demographic profile of *Newsweek* readers is to be believed – would likely read herself. Sorkin seems to be addressing the “lowest common denominator”

American – a fictional blank slate of a person who has been inculcated with nothing but the most “American” values.

Contemplating this kind of fictional, archetypal “American” audience member as someone to whom a storyteller’s message is directed is problematic from an American Studies perspective, because the field rejected the notion of such an archetype decades ago. The civil rights movements of the 1960s and the rise of identity politics of the 1970s challenged the theoretical concept of America as a whole. American Studies scholars at the time began reflecting on previous standpoints of the discipline and henceforth criticized the myth-symbol school as predominantly white, privileged, Protestant, and male.⁹⁰ In *Paradigm Dramas*, Gene Wise discusses how the interest in activism, community involvement, and consciousness-raising during the 1960s affected American Studies, resulting in the field’s embrace of conflict and division as a characteristic of American culture, as opposed to consensus.⁹¹ The consequence, he wrote, was that American Studies is “less inclined now to take readings from a single vantage point on *The American Experience*; instead, we look upon America from a variety of different, often competing, perspectives...”⁹²

The terms that were once so popular – American mind, American identity, American way – were debunked because it was determined that they excluded so many people representing a wide range of ethnicities, classes, religions, sexualities, and genders. Identity-based scholarship, though it was still on the periphery of American Studies, was a powerful enough force that it, according to Janice Radway, challenged

⁹⁰ Wise, 184-185

⁹¹ Wise, 185-187

⁹² Wise, 192

“the notion that the American democratic idea uniformly included within its purview all those who inhabited the United States.”⁹³

The above account is a streamlined, condensed version of the transformation of American Studies from a discipline that approached America as a whole and “American” as an identity to one that recognizes and emphasizes difference between Americans. Within the chapters and analysis to follow, there will be discussion of the cultural values Quindlen and Sorkin rely on within their political storytelling, some of which will indeed be labeled as “American.” In the context of this project, let it be clear that these values are to be conceived as *ideas* rather than beliefs to which all or even a majority of Americans ascribe – ideas that contribute to the concept of America in the cultural imagination. As cultural knowledge, these ideas loom large regardless of how they do or do not manifest themselves in the perspectives and identities of individual Americans.

To that end, this project is highly interested in the everyday *experience* of storytelling. The ways in which individual readers and viewers experience and interact with Quindlen’s and Sorkin’s stories – how they make these forms of expression meaningful to themselves as individuals and how they find themselves inspired by them – will be a topic of intellectual conversation within the case study chapters. How does the satisfaction one feels at the conclusion of a story, wherein all the loose ends are tied and the characters meet fates they “deserve,” influence one’s reception of the story’s message? How can the emotional effects of a well-told story on its audience lead to material effects on individuals or even cultures at large? These and other questions will be contemplated within the case study chapters.

⁹³ Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name?,” *American Quarterly* 51 (March 1999), 8-9

The Case Studies

As a means to explore how storytellers are able to capitalize on humans' cultural relationship with storytelling in order to connect with a politically diverse audience on politically divisive topics, this project will undertake two case studies with each focusing on a publicly known figure who communicates to mass audiences on political topics through storytelling. The first is journalist Anna Quindlen, who for more than two decades wrote columns of a political nature for *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* using a style that relies demonstrably on storytelling and narrative elements. The second is Aaron Sorkin, creator and screenwriter of *The West Wing*, a fictional television show set in the political world of the White House.

The first case study will cover the columns Anna Quindlen wrote for *Newsweek* between 1999 and 2009. All 223 columns are analyzed in search of an understanding of how and when Quindlen uses storytelling elements and narrative strategies to communicate political opinions in a way that is entertaining, engaging, and at times moving for her readership. In addition to this analysis, an interview with Quindlen herself discusses what she considers to be her strategies and successes as a political columnist. In order to ascertain the impression her columns leave on both critics and readers, the case study relies on media profiles and reviews of her collected works posted by individuals on Amazon.com. The case study highlights the storytelling strategies Quindlen utilizes to greatest effect and demonstrates how she uses them to evoke emotion in her readers in a satisfying manner, to evoke empathy in her readers as they consider political issues, and to engender trust from her readers so that she can more precisely target her readers' values. For instance, does her understanding of narrative structure

enable her to build emotional tension throughout a column? Does her brand of candor lend her more credibility with her audience? Does her approach enable her readers to be more open-minded on such politically-charged topics as abortion, gun control, and the death penalty? This case study delves further into the structure of the Hero's Quest and how a storyteller can personalize it in order to meet an audience's expectations in an unexpected way, something for which Quindlen seems to have a talent.⁹⁴ It will also take a closer look at the Hero, how the Hero is used to instruct and persuade, and why the Hero remains attractive to audiences. The case study concludes with an interrogation of whom or what the casualties may be when one writes on complex political topics in Quindlen's style.

The second case study covers the first season of Aaron Sorkin's Emmy Award-winning television drama, *The West Wing*, which aired on network television from the fall of 1999 through spring 2000.⁹⁵ The show's storyline centers on fictional Democratic U.S. President Josiah Bartlet and his White House senior staff. The case study explores how, despite plotlines that portray partisan political operatives pursuing and promoting liberal policies, the show's first-rate storytelling enables it to be enjoyable, satisfying, and at times influential to a politically diverse audience.⁹⁶ To conduct the case study, the season is viewed by this scholar and its teleplays are read to identify Sorkin's strategies and patterns within the narratives and characterizations. Sorkin-related Internet message boards are combed for reactions and impressions related to the show's first season.

⁹⁴ The Hero's Quest is a prevalent narrative structure that involves a protagonist or protagonists facing struggles and trials in pursuit of a goal. The story begins with an Inciting Incident that takes the hero outside his or her balanced world and presents a goal that will return the hero's life back to balance. The goal presents a challenge and obstacles, or forces of antagonism, will be faced in order to achieve it.

⁹⁵ David Bauder, "NBC Cancels 'West Wing' After 7 Seasons," ABC.com. <http://web.archive.org/web/20060221143405/http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=1531495> (Accessed December 17, 2012).

⁹⁶ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 13

Critical commentary and reviews from within the media are also researched and referenced. The case study establishes how, as *The West Wing*'s chief screenwriter, Sorkin relies on the narrative structure known as the Hero's Quest in order to target cultural values that transcend national party politics, and also how he provides straw-men in the form of common "enemies," such as foreign governments and the increasingly unpopular U.S. Congress, against which the audience can unite.⁹⁷ In rooting for the protagonists on the President's staff – which the viewer is compelled to do based on the character's embodiment of certain cultural values and their portrayal as heroes who are on a perpetual quest for justice and as public servants who continually eschew politics in favor of policies – the viewer begins to root for the staffers' aims, which include traditionally liberal political issues such as supporting immigration, strengthening gun control, and regulating the financial industry.⁹⁸ The case study examines the ways in which Sorkin relies on the relative immutability of seemingly universal cultural values and the unpopularity of certain institutions to prompt his audience to favor fictional issue-oriented crusades. This case study demonstrates how, in spite of a politically-polarized political climate and viewership, *The West Wing* manages to be simultaneously entertaining and politically influential to a politically diverse audience. Additionally, as with Quindlen's work, an analysis of Sorkin's approach in terms of who and what goes underrepresented – the "casualties," as one might call them – is undertaken.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 23-24, 46

⁹⁸ Ibid., 32; "Pilot." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; "Five Votes Down." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr. & Patrick Cadell (Story). Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; "Enemies." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Ron Osborn & Jeff Reno (teleplay) and Rick Cleveland, Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr. & Patrick Cadell (Story). Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Why Quindlen and Sorkin?

Given the dissertation's focus on humans' cultural relationship to storytelling and how well-told stories can have material effects on audience members and the greater political arena, Sorkin and Quindlen in particular are chosen as subjects because their work relies on elements of storytelling in order to communicate and promote politically liberal – and therefore potentially divisive – ideas, and also because their work is broadcast widely via mainstream, culturally-recognizable platforms. There is a theme of commonness throughout the two selections. The ways in which audiences are exposed to these storytellers is common, whether through watching primetime television or reading a magazine.⁹⁹ Sorkin and Quindlen, in communicating to a mass audience, are targeting the common denominator – cultural values – and attempting to build bonds based on common cultural experiences with the goal of casting their message as nothing more than “common sense.” While typically the field of American Studies leaves the interrogation of the “mainstream” to other disciplines, it also advocates for the study of “low” culture.¹⁰⁰ These two case studies involve public figures and modes of communication that straddle some of these distinctions.

For instance, Quindlen spent the formative years of her career at the most identifiable print outlet in the United States, the *New York Times*, and was awarded the most identifiable honor a journalist can receive, the Pulitzer Prize. Her columns were published in *Newsweek*, a magazine which, at the time her columns appeared, was

⁹⁹ Though it is no longer in print, *Newsweek* was still in print from 1999-2009, when Quindlen was penning her biweekly column.

¹⁰⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 2. According to Frederic Jameson, “one fundamental feature of all the postmodernisms” was that they helped dissolve the division between high and low culture. The result of these and many other influences is that, with respect to material culture, American Studies scholars can now justifiably focus on popular material culture and other types of mass culture as much as so-called “high” art.

ubiquitous as a publication reliably stocked for purchase or perusal in the check-out line at grocery stores across the country. Similarly, *The West Wing* was a hit television show appearing during prime time viewing hours on the then-leading basic cable network, NBC. At its height of popularity, it reached an estimated 20 million viewers. It, too, received mainstream accolades, winning both an Emmy and a Golden Globe for best television drama. The focus on mainstream instances of storytelling that communicate about progressive political issues is necessary in order to consider the cultural experience of the masses and the daily experience of the ordinary citizen. It is to this moderate majority, moderate both in terms of everyday living and political identity, that these storytellers target their message. It is by connecting with this sector of society that political influence may possibly result. And it is through mainstream venues that they are reached.

Conclusion

As this project explores how storytellers are able to use their narrative talents to exploit their audience members' cultural relationship with storytelling, its primary interests revolve around two things: first, how storytellers rely on cultural values to both make and support their message; and second, how storytellers are able to render a satisfying storytelling experience for their audience in a way that moves them emotionally. Not surprisingly, this scholar is curious as to whether there is much of a difference between being moved emotionally and being moved politically. If a Republican viewer can root for the characters on *The West Wing* to accomplish a liberal policy objective, will the emotions have an effect on one's politics? If a conservative

reader can read one of Quindlen's columns on end-of-life issues and – despite agreeing with the GOP talking point about “death panels” during the debate over health care reform – feel empathy for those who want to make their own choices about end-of-life care, will the emotions have an effect on one's politics? Those are not questions that fall within the scope of one dissertation, but hints of their answers may appear in the words of viewers, readers, and critics who are taken in by the storytellers examined herein.

It will be interesting to compare the intent of the storytellers to the effects of their stories as described by their audiences. Sorkin has stated publicly and repeatedly that he had absolutely no political agenda in writing *The West Wing*, but that declaration has been consistently dismissed by viewers and critics alike.¹⁰¹ Quindlen's intent as a columnist seems more transparent; she was hired to have a political opinion and to share it with readers every other week. But was her effect as a storyteller more than, or something other than, a political one? As this project investigates the audience reactions to, internalizations of, and support and proliferation of these stories and their messages, it asks what might be taken from these responses in terms of the utility of stories to communicate political messages to politically diverse audiences.

Five chapters follow this introduction: two chapters on each of the case studies and a conclusion. Chapters Two and Three encompass the case study on Anna Quindlen's *Newsweek* columns. Chapter Two provides an overview of Quindlen's style

¹⁰¹ Sonia Saraiya, “10 Episodes That Show *The West Wing* Was Drama First, Politics Second,” AVClub.com, May 21, 2014. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.avclub.com/article/10-episodes-show-west-wing-was-drama-first-politic-204597>; Aaron Sorkin, Interview by Terence Smith, *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, September 27, 2000; Peter Brown, “‘West Wing’: Fictional Fraud Breaches Real Trust,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 9, 2001. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2001-11-09/news/0111090123_1_wag-the-dog-multiple-sclerosis-west-wing; John Podhoretz, “The Liberal Imagination,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 27, 2000. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/011/183dacgh.asp>.

of writing before initiating discussions of media as a vehicle to shape society, the power of columns as a medium, and the role of schema theory. It considers how Quindlen's work is seen as educational or influential, and the reception of Quindlen's writing across the political spectrum. Chapter Three reviews the concept of commonsensical narrative structure, leading into a discussion of Quindlen's use of it to evoke emotion and satisfy her audience, to evoke empathy, to make the political personal, and to offer Heroes to which her readers can relate. The chapter examines the ways that Quindlen engenders trust as a columnist and how she capitalizes on it in order to target her reader's values to support her claims. The third chapter concludes with a consideration of the casualties of Quindlen's narrative strategies and what the field of American Studies might say about both her strategies and her successes.

The case study on the first season of *The West Wing* comprises Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four provides an overview of the show itself as well as Sorkin's style and reputation as a writer. It will investigate the show's political slant from several perspectives – the creators, media critics, and viewers – most of whom have different ideas about where the show stands politically. The chapter addresses the influence of *The West Wing* as a fictional story on America's political reality, including specific examples of influence and education. The fourth chapter also discusses the power of storytelling as a medium and considers the reception of the show across the political ideological spectrum. Chapter Five begins with a review of relevant literature on stories and storytelling before examining Sorkin's use of particular narrative strategies: his characters' embodiment of values, his use of the Hero's Quest, his equating of political issues with cultural values, and his use of common "enemies" to unite his audience. The

fifth chapter ends with a discussion of the casualties of Sorkin's narrative approach and what fellow American Studies scholars might think about both his shortcomings and successes.

The dissertation's sixth and final chapter, the conclusion, provides a summary and synthesis of the arguments made both theoretically and through the case studies, comparing the findings to the hypotheses held by this scholar from the outset. Two publicly known figures using their talents as storytellers to communicate to large, politically diverse audiences on politically divisive topics: does the medium matter? Does the intent? Are the communication goals of an entertainer and a pundit more alike than first assumed? Are the ends? The answers to these questions will inform the contributions of a project invested in the notion that it is culture's relationship with storytelling that makes possible a lasting effect on one's audience, and an exemplary talent for telling stories the skill necessary to achieve it.

“[I have been] hugely influenced by...the notion that it is possible to combine a good story with an interest in social welfare.”
Anna Quindlen¹⁰²

CHAPTER TWO

“The Laureate of Real Life”

In a 1995 profile of Anna Quindlen in the *Baltimore Sun*, writer Alice Steinbach described her subject to readers in the following manner:

Yes, she is warm and funny. Yes, she is smart and insightful. Yes, she is down-to-earth and real, confessional almost... And yes, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and best-selling novelist Anna Quindlen in person is just like Anna Quindlen in print: the kind of woman you'd like to have as your best friend.¹⁰³

Steinbach's description of Quindlen echoes what fans of the writer have known since 1986, when she first started writing a column called “Life in the 30s” for the *New York Times*. Quindlen's readers feel a connection to her that goes beyond the typical journalist-audience relationship of inform-and-be-informed. For much of her audience, to read Quindlen's columns is to be taken in by her style, inspired by her perspectives, moved by her arguments, and convinced of her message. Reader reviews posted on Amazon.com of Quindlen's collections of columns from her time as the *Times*' first female op-ed columnist and her stint as a columnist for *Newsweek* offer a glimpse into how her writing makes readers feel:

“Her points are made so clearly and judiciously... I kept reading and rereading the essays, each time thinking, ‘Wait a minute, that's what I think!’”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² “Interview with Anna Quindlen,” GoodReads.com, April 2010. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/521.Annna_Quindlen.

¹⁰³ Alice Steinbach, “Pulitzer Prize-Winning Columnist Starts Over on Novel Track,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 14, 1995. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-05-14/features/1995134149_1_anna-quindlen-pulitzer-estrogen

¹⁰⁴ SanFrantastic, “A humanistic response to America's social issues,” customer review of *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public and the Private*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, February 10, 2000, <http://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Out-Loud-Personal->

“I believe Quindlen puts into words the things we all feel in our hearts, minds, bodies and souls.”¹⁰⁵

“Anna Quindlen writes as if she broke into my body and stole my thoughts, my dreams and my memories.”¹⁰⁶

“I particularly liked...her sensitivity and humanity and found myself saying OUT LOUD, ‘Yes, Anna! I understand.’”¹⁰⁷

“Anna Quindlen articulates what so many of us are living in a manner that makes us think ‘Yes! THAT’S it!’”¹⁰⁸

Time and again readers cite Quindlen’s “unique gift” of clarity, openness, and way with words as reasons they so easily relate to her and her message, and reasons they find themselves clipping her columns or buying her books and sharing them with friends and family.¹⁰⁹ “Every woman wishes she had an ‘Anna Quindlen girlfriend,’” one reviewer

Political/dp/0449909050/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1439324561&sr=8-1&keywords=anna+quindlen+thinking+out+loud (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ Michele Cozzens, “Anna Quindlen Doing What She Does Best,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, April 8, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ E. Woolridge, “TEN STARS WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE,” customer review of *Living Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, November 27, 2001, http://www.amazon.com/Living-Out-Loud-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0449909123/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=1M47TDFXJ23NCQMZH9AK (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ A Reader, “The best of the bunch,” customer review of *Living Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, September 28, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Living-Out-Loud-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0449909123/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=1M47TDFXJ23NCQMZH9AK (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁰⁸ Life Out Loud, “Excellent and easily identifiable,” customer review of *Living Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, December 13, 2001, http://www.amazon.com/Living-Out-Loud-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0449909123/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=1M47TDFXJ23NCQMZH9AK (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ Steinbach; E. Woolridge; Cooke, Gail, “INVIGORATING, INSPIRING, INFORMING,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, April 17, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015); sinkingfeeling, April 1, 2005 (10:42 am), comment on democraticunderground.com Message Board, “Anna Quindlen - The Culture of Each Life,” *Editorials & Other Articles*, April 1, 2005, http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=103x116873 (Accessed June 9, 2014); SanFrantastic; Michele Cozzens

writes, “that wise woman who is living the same life you are, but sees the real meaning behind everyday events.”¹¹⁰

It was during the time Quindlen was writing “Life in the 30s” that *New York* magazine nicknamed her the “Laureate of Real Life.” Then, and in her prolific collection of writings to follow, readers came to know and depend on a style that, at the end of each piece, made them think, as one reviewer writes, “Once again, Anna Quindlen nails it.”¹¹¹ The next two chapters will explore and theorize how Quindlen is able to take topics ranging from controversial to mundane – most of them political in nature – and make them palatable and convincing to a broad national audience.

Specifically, the chapters will consider the collection of columns she wrote for *Newsweek* between 1999 and 2009 in an effort to determine how Quindlen relies on narrative strategies and depends on her readership’s cultural relationship with storytelling to connect with her audience across ideological divides, in spite of her writing’s liberal bent. The case study will be conducted through a close reading of her articles, a review of media profiles and critiques of her work, and consideration of reader responses to collections of her columns available in book form. These responses take the form of voluntary reviews posted on Amazon.com by non-professional individuals, and will be used as reflections of how some readers perceive and react to Quindlen’s columns.

To begin the analysis of Quindlen’s collection of columns for *Newsweek*, this chapter will provide an overview of a number of topics, the first of which is Quindlen’s

¹¹⁰ Sunny Hersh, “The Missing Wise Woman in Your Life,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, April 25, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹¹¹ Midlodemocrat April 1, 2005 (10:37 am), comment on democraticunderground.com Message Board, “Anna Quindlen - The Culture of Each Life,” *Editorials & Other Articles*, April 1, 2005, http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=103x116873 (Accessed June 9, 2014).

particular brand of writing and what critics and readers alike have to say about her style as both a columnist and novelist. Next, this chapter will consider the relationships between the press and its audience and between journalism and storytelling, enabling a discussion of how the news can work to shape and influence society. A section on the power of news columns as a specific type of journalism will follow. The chapter will then provide an overview of the social psychological sub-discipline of schema theory, which posits that humans possess a strong intellectual and cognitive relationship to storytelling and story structure. Finally, the chapter will review how Quindlen's political columns have been received: Have they been educational and influential? How does their reception vary across the political spectrum?

While her cultural or political influence – where possible – will be examined, this case study will focus on Quindlen's intentions as a communicator more than her effect. Though one can assume that the hope of any political writer would be to change minds and influence voting behavior, or even to go beyond that and instigate activism, Quindlen maintains that perhaps a subtler goal is more realistic, and possibly as satisfying. In response to a question posed by this scholar on what it was she hoped to attain with each column, Quindlen answered:

I think it was H. L. Mencken who once said that the point of journalism was to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. That's a pretty good starting point for a columnist. But during my years at the Times and Newsweek, I got more than a few messages from readers who said that they didn't agree with me, but I always made them look at an issue in a new light. I felt a great sense of accomplishment when I got those messages.¹¹²

¹¹² Quindlen, Anna, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

In the discussions that follow in this chapter and the next, an exploration into how Quindlen employed storytelling strategies to achieve her goal to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted will be pursued.

About Quindlen

Quindlen already had an impressive career as a journalist by the time she began the bi-weekly column that appeared on the last page of *Newsweek*, offering a liberal political perspective and alternating with well-known conservative columnist George Will, who at that point had written for the magazine for over twenty years. Quindlen started her career at the *New York Times* in 1977, rising to the position of Deputy Metro Editor by 1985, at which time she made the choice to quit in order to devote more time to her first child and the child she had on the way. Not wanting to lose the rising journalistic star, Quindlen was offered the chance to write her first column, the aforementioned “Life in the 30s,” for which she wrote about her own life and experiences. Three years later, pregnant with her third child, Quindlen once again decided to take a step back from her work at the *Times*. Again, hesitant to let her go, she was offered the chance to be an op-ed columnist at the esteemed newspaper, sharing the title – and equal pay – with the likes of William Safire and Abe Rosenthal. The column, entitled “Public & Private,” began in 1990, and within two years Quindlen had won a Pulitzer Prize for her writing on subjects including abortion, the Gulf War, and the controversy surrounding the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court.

Yet again, after only four years as an op-ed columnist, Quindlen sought to leave the *Times* and pursue other interests, this time to write fiction.¹¹³ Her first novel, *Object Lessons*, was published in 1995 and since then she has published six more, all of which have been made the *Times*' best-sellers list and three of which have been made into commercially successful full-length feature films.¹¹⁴ It is for this reason, having had tremendously prosperous careers as both a political columnist and a professional storyteller, that Quindlen serves as a particularly useful choice for a case study on how culture's relationship to storytelling enables storytellers to communicate politically divisive messages across politically ideological divides. Within her columns, Quindlen uses a variety of storytelling elements in order to effectively communicate her message to the audience. Significantly, her use of such elements is what contributed to her early career success. When asked by this scholar during an email interview in August 2015 whether she consciously uses elements of storytelling in her political writing, Quindlen explains,

That's actually one of the reasons I was hired at the Times... The paper, and others in its general gene pool, had begun to introduce literary techniques into its stories. Metaphor, simile, alliteration – they were always in my softer newspaper work. I write by ear, so there's meter and rhythm as well.¹¹⁵

Upon reading and analyzing Quindlen's 223 *Newsweek* columns, her particular strengths as a political writer became clear to this scholar and will be considered in detail

¹¹³ Steinbach

¹¹⁴ Lisa Belkin, "The Best Part of Parenting." Weblog entry. Motherlode: Adventures in Parenting. *The New York Times*, March 22, 2011. <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/the-best-part-of-parenting/> (Accessed 19 March 2012); Stephen Holden, "Movie Review: One True Thing (1998)" *The New York Times* 18 Sept. 1998. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F00E0DF1630F93BA2575AC0A96E958260> (Accessed 19 March 2012); Hal Erickson. "Review Summary: Blessings (2003)" *The New York Times*. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/295831/Blessings/overview> (Accessed 19 March 2012); Michael Speier, "TV Reviews: Black and Blue" *Variety*. 16 Nov. 1999. <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117759780> (Accessed 19 March 2012).

¹¹⁵ Quindlen, e-mail

in the chapter to follow. They include her understanding and use of narrative structure – building tension within her pieces, including rhythmic beats, and providing a climax; her ability to conjure emotions and satisfy the reader’s expectations; and her penchant for inspiring empathy and making the personal translate to the political for her audience. All of these tactics, combined with other elements of her style, allow Quindlen to engender trust from her readers in order to target and influence their values.

“I think you find many of the same effects, locutions, tropes in my work
no matter what the form. For good and for ill.”
Anna Quindlen¹¹⁶

Quindlen’s Style and Voice

When asked by this scholar how she would describe her writing style, and whether she thinks her style differs from medium to medium – reporter, columnist, novelist – Quindlen replies, “It’s all the same thing. I’m too lazy to pull much of a switcheroo. And, frankly, I don’t think it’s possible. The most distinctive thing about any good writer is voice. If you’ve got it, about 90 per cent of your work is done. If you don’t have it, you’re cooked.”¹¹⁷

Quindlen’s voice certainly is distinctive, and many have described it in much the same way. One Amazon reviewer defines “trademark Quindlenese” as “candid, provocative, thoughtful, and insightful.”¹¹⁸ Maria Russo, reviewing Quindlen’s 2013 memoir *Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake* for Slate.com, describes Quindlen’s voice as

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Gail Cooke

“moderate, measured, maternal, personal but not confessional,” noting that one can sense “the confident pop in her voice, the instinctive feel for that adoring audience.”¹¹⁹

Somewhat pejoratively, Russo goes on to talk about the cultures that, in Quindlen’s own admission, have influenced her heavily: the “ethnic Catholic milieu...the Irish and Italian mashup that shaped her sensibility.” Russo brings in this cultural background to go into more detail of how Quindlen’s signature style lures the reader in:

You can see the Irish in Quindlen’s ability to let the words tumble out on just about any subject, to say one thing and then a few sentences later seem to suggest its exact opposite, pulling it all together in smoothly flowing generalities tinged with lovely little images, occasionally throwing in a heart-stopping moment of clarity. It’s what some of us might call, not without affection, “blarney.”¹²⁰

The “heart-stopping moment of clarity” is significant, as it represents the instance at which Quindlen attains several crucial aims of effective communication. When readers feel clarity, they find themselves understanding the writer’s message, relating to it, and realizing that it makes sense to them. The moment of clarity is what the reviewers above are describing when they say, “Yes, that’s it!” And possibly, the most important aspect of that moment of clarity is that something Quindlen is saying seems clear to the reader that was not clear before. A perspective has shifted and the world – or at least the topic at hand – comes into focus.

When writing on political topics, this shift in perspective is the ultimate achievement, and it matters not whether it is attained through “blarney” or through some other type of communication style. There is more to Quindlen’s style than what Russo

¹¹⁹ Maria Russo, “When I’m Sixty, More,” Slate.com, May 5, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2012/05/anna_quindlen_on_aging_lots_of_candles_plenty_of_cake_reviewed_.html.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

described – an authoritative tone that serves her well as a political columnist. She tends to write using a matter-of-fact tone that seems to subtly convey to the audience that her version of the facts is *the* version of the facts, that morality is on her side, and that most people agree with her already.

As attractive as Quindlen’s voice is to millions of readers, not everyone finds it appealing. Some, like Lee Siegel, see Quindlen’s style as an affect, used purposefully to put her columns beyond reproach. Writing for *The New Republic* in 1999, Lee Siegel refers to Quindlen as “one of the original Nice Queens,” someone whose work falls within the realm of “Nice Writing.” For Siegel, “Nice Writing is a violent affability, a deadly sweetness, a fatal gentle touch,” the effect of which is to “place the supremely empathetic author in a protected niche, far beyond the reader’s capacity to criticize.”¹²¹ Reading selections from the work of Barbara Kingsolver of what Siegel considers “Nice Writing”, he seems to describe writing that is a little too clever, perhaps too quip-y, and unabashed in its aim to trigger emotion. The term itself, “Nice Queens,” holds sexist undertones, and one wonders whether Siegel would have the same reaction to a male writer who relied on emotion as heavily – someone like Aaron Sorkin, for instance, who is the subject of this dissertation’s other case study. It is clearly not Siegel’s favorite style, but in a way it is not far off from how more favorable critics of Quindlen’s writing describe it. Writing a review of Quindlen’s latest novel, *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*, Heller McAlpin talks about Quindlen’s “common touch, her ability to combine terrific

¹²¹ Lee Siegel, “Sweet and Low,” review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver, *New Republic*, March 22, 1999. Accessed November 9, 2015. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/sweet-and-low>.

powers of empathy with a journalist's skill at sussing the zeitgeist and highlighting just the right details.”¹²²

Less than favorable reviews of her collections of political columns on Amazon.com find Quindlen's more memoir-like columns based on everyday life – those that represent the part of her style that Russo calls Quindlen's “sentimentality and self-referentiality” – to be a “terrific bore.”¹²³ A reviewer who only signs off as “A Customer” complains that Quindlen talks about her family too much and that her opinions never seem to surprise, writing in the review, “Vladimir Nabokov wrote that it is always the second rate writer who appears to be the old friend, popping up to reassure us with the obvious. And so it is with our friend Anna.”¹²⁴ Another reviewer, Dick Meyers, writes that “Quindlen suffers from self-involved, self-satisfied writing. She's so taken with her rather mundane reflections, average in their insight, and lackluster ‘poignant [sic] moments’ she works so hard to construct, that she cannot see the inviting realm of ideas – just out there, apparently beyond her reach.”¹²⁵

Critics' references to Quindlen as an empathetic author is a description Quindlen readily claims, and her choice to write openly and honestly about her everyday life is one she defends. In an interview posted by HuffingtonPost.com, Quindlen says, “I love the

¹²² Heller McAlpin, “Anna Quindlen Is (Still) the Voice of Her Generation,” *NPR*, January 29, 2014. Accessed November 16, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/29/264553979/anna-quindlen-is-still-the-voice-of-her-generation>.

¹²³ Russo

¹²⁴ A Customer, “Excellent, concise, and thought-provoking essays,” customer review of *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public and the Private*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, September 24, 2002, http://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Out-Loud-Personal-Political/dp/0449909050/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1439324561&sr=8-1&keywords=anna+quindlen+thinking+out+loud (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹²⁵ Dick Meyers, “Self-Satisfied Schmata,” customer review of *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public and the Private*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, April 28, 2003, http://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Out-Loud-Personal-Political/dp/0449909050/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1439324561&sr=8-1&keywords=anna+quindlen+thinking+out+loud (Accessed August 8, 2015).

idea that readers feel as though they know me, that there's this personal connection between and among us." In the same interview, she talks about "warm" writers who write with emotion, and that she thinks female writers are more likely to be considered "warm" because they "deal with ordinary life. The kitchen table tells as true a story as the battlefield."¹²⁶ Amazon.com reviewer "fascinated observer" also uses the term to describe Quindlen: "She is opinionated...but she always comes through in a warm and thought provoking way."¹²⁷

In a collection of writing entitled *Gender and Political Communication in America*, several scholars attempt to explain "feminine communication style" based on academic inquiries conducted within the field. Feminine communication style can encompass many of the following strategies: the use of personal experience and anecdotes to challenge typical male authorities; a tone that is more tentative than commanding; a tendency to appeal to the emotions of the audience, seducing them into agreement; reliance on inclusive pronouns and a theme of support and empowerment; and an avoidance of confrontational topics and language. Whereas a more masculine style tends to rely more on a dominating tone, the prioritization of deductive reasoning over observation, and speaking as if from a position of leadership or expertise.¹²⁸ Kim Reiser writes that the feminine style – its tentative nature, its seductive style, its inclusive focus, its reliance on experience rather than learned reason – arose in the nineteenth century

¹²⁶ Lois Alter Mark, "Anna Quindlen on Reading, Writing and Reading," HuffingtonPost.com, November 18, 2014. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lois-alter-mark/anna-quindlen-on-reading-_b_6180200.html.

¹²⁷ fascinated observer, "Sweet Inspiration," customer review of *Living Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, June 16, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Living-Out-Loud-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0449909123/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=1M47TDFXJ23NCQMZH9AK (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹²⁸ Shereé Keith, "Women Who Spoke for Themselves: Working Women, Suffrage, and the Construction of Women's Rhetorical Style," in Janis L. Edwards, *Gender and Political Communication in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), 23-4

when women were beginning to speak up and out more in a time when it was still frowned upon.¹²⁹

Helpfully, Kathleen Hall Jamieson concludes that to be a successful communicator in the public realm, women must combine and negotiate both the feminine and masculine styles of communication, and it seems that if the definitions of each are to be believed, Quindlen does just that.¹³⁰ Quindlen relies heavily on lived experience and personal anecdotes, but writes about them with authority, bolstering her experience with research and reasoning. She triggers emotions but she does not sugarcoat the damning facts. She will not hesitate to tackle controversial issues such as late-term abortion or physician-assisted suicide, but she brings a nuance to them that many in the political arena cannot. She does, however, heavily employ the use of empathy, an approach seen by communication scholars and by Quindlen herself to be a particular skill of feminine writers.¹³¹ The role of empathy in storytelling and specifically in Quindlen's political columns will be explored further in the chapter to follow. Based on the reviews of critics and readers alike, it is safe to say they agree that Quindlen's writing style both employs and evokes it.

Media's Relationship with Society

Before Quindlen was a columnist and before she was a novelist, she was a reporter. She often references how this experience impacts the approach she takes in her research and writing as a columnist. This section begins by providing context for how

¹²⁹ Kim Reiser, "Crafting a Feminine Presidency: Elizabeth Dole's 1999 Presidential Campaign," in Janis L. Edwards, *Gender and Political Communication in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), 42

¹³⁰ Keith, 24-5

¹³¹ Anna Quindlen. "The Great Obligation." *Newsweek* 19 Apr. 2004. Print.

members of the press tend to conceptualize their audience. It will then consider the relationship between journalism and storytelling, and how their similarities enable the news to shape and influence society.

In *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Political Process*, Susan Herbst delves into how the entity of public opinion is created in the minds of political actors, and what effects this conceptualization can have. In her section on the press, she discusses how members of the press typically conceive the “public” as their audience, and further, that they feel they have a good idea of who their typical reader might be: someone who is an amalgamation of the public’s interests and values. Similarly, Herbst’s research shows that many Americans seem to consider media coverage and public opinion to be one and the same.¹³² Herbst claims that it is part of a reporter’s identity to want to know what moves public opinion and why. Beyond knowing their readers, a deep source of pride for the media is their role in *shaping* their readers, if only through their ability to manufacture the appearance – and therefore influence – of popular consensus. In addition, Herbst states, reporters want to tell readers what it is that ought to move them, and they have many of the tools necessary to do so.¹³³ They can set the agenda by bringing an issue to the attention of the public. They can frame the issue by choosing which facts to prioritize in order to influence how the audience understands an issue. And they can prime the audience to interpret the issue in a certain way.¹³⁴

While the media has to battle, to a certain extent, with politicians over the agenda-setting role, they retain a tremendous amount of political power as the primary source of

¹³² Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 63

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 62, 103-104, 109-110

¹³⁴ James A. Gardner, *What Are Campaigns For?*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108-9

information about politics.¹³⁵ Because the public believes that issues raised by the media are more important, the press can determine the viability of any issue.¹³⁶ And in highlighting an issue they feel is important, they are not only bringing it to the attention of readers, but of political leaders as well. The media can and will keep reporting on an issue if necessary until lawmakers decide to take it up.¹³⁷ This strategy has led Thomas E. Patterson, among others, to conclude that “journalists are increasingly influential political actors.”¹³⁸

However, Patterson’s assertion remains a relative statement; exerting influence on any reader or viewer is an uphill battle. James A. Gardner states in his book, *What Are Campaigns For?*, that agenda-setting, framing, and priming only have an effect on what the readers think *about*, not what they think. Gardner demonstrates that because of the psychological processes through which people gather political knowledge, changing one’s opinion about a political matter, which is stabilized by and rooted within myriad related attitudes and values – though not impossible – happens very rarely.¹³⁹

The Power of Columns as a Medium

Is it possible that news columns – and particularly Quindlen’s columns, given their reliance on storytelling elements – circumvent some of the obstacles faced by conventional news articles in reaching their readers? In other words, can columns

¹³⁵ Ibid., 107; Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 17

¹³⁶ Darrell M. West, “Free Falls, High Dives, and the Future of Democratic Accountability,” *The Politics of News/The News of Politics*, Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, & Pippa Norris, eds., (Washington: CQ Press, 2nd ed., 2007), 148; Hart, 171

¹³⁷ Herbst, 170

¹³⁸ Thomas E. Patterson, “Icon-Anchors and Russian Television Viewers,” *The Politics of News/The News of Politics*, Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, & Pippa Norris, eds., (Washington: CQ Press, 2nd ed., 2007), 23

¹³⁹ Gardner, 85-6, 110

operate in ways that traditional news stories cannot? Jack Lule, a scholar in the fields of Journalism and Communication, contends that the news is presented as a story and that journalists are storytellers, first and foremost.¹⁴⁰ While both news articles and news columns emulate stories in various ways, they differ in terms of their styles and their boundaries. News stories are typically written to mimic an “inverted triangle” where the most vital facts are prioritized and mentioned in decreasing order of importance. Within columns, the writer has more freedom to manipulate the structure and craft the prose in order to grab and hold the reader’s attention, making political arguments in ways that news stories cannot, based on their limitations. In Quindlen’s case, her columns more closely mimic the structure of a story than a typical news article. Because her columns tend to resemble the structure of a story, they are able to take advantage of certain benefits enabled by story structure, attracting and maintaining the attention of an audience while communicating to audience members on an individual level.

Lule’s book, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*, delves deeply into the concept of myth as it relates to the news, reviewing a number of mythological tropes that have been used and reused throughout time to shape storytelling and to teach and mold society, both as individuals and as a whole.¹⁴¹ Though these myths come to us in a myriad of formats – from movies, to radio shows, to comic books – he posits that it is the news that serves as “the primary vehicle for myth in our time.”¹⁴² A myth is a traditional story or legend, typically told and retold over a long span of time, passed down from generation to generation. Myths have thrived in every known culture,

¹⁴⁰ Lule, 3; Also underscored in Jarol B. Manheim, “The News Shapers: Strategic Communication as a Third Force in Newsmaking,” *The Politics of News/The News of Politics*, Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, & Pippa Norris, eds., (Washington: CQ Press, 2nd ed., 2007).

¹⁴¹ Lule, 21-22

¹⁴² Ibid., 18-19

helping humans organize and rationalize their experiences, and enhancing the meaning of everyday life.¹⁴³ They also instruct and shape society, both in terms of large social institutions and individual habits and rituals – everything from what humans eat to how they marry.¹⁴⁴ They are intended to educate the public and therefore they address society as a whole.¹⁴⁵ Throughout time, myths have been the archetypes that influence storytelling.

The concept of myth is useful for this discussion because opinion columns like Anna Quindlen’s serve many of the same purposes that myths do. Like myth, they organize information, provide insight, and offer comfort in an unstable world, which is why they are trusted by their audience. For instance, Amazon.com reviewer Gail Cooke contends that “to read [Quindlen] is to be invigorated, inspired, and informed.”¹⁴⁶ By virtue of familiarity, myths help people organize information and even one’s own experiences in the face of data overload.¹⁴⁷ Such prioritization is essential for columnists themselves, who are dealing with limited space in which to convey their message. But more importantly, due to the prioritization already undertaken by the columnists in writing the column, opinion columns provide this same service to its readers, who are faced with an overabundance of news and headlines, day in and day out. For instance, through the process of selecting each column’s topic and relevant facts, columnists have the power to suggest what, amongst all that is going on in the world at a given time, should be considered most salient to the reader. With control over this selection, a columnist is communicating to her audience that she knows what will matter to them

¹⁴³ Campbell, 1; Lule, 53

¹⁴⁴ Lule, 15, 16 (quoting Mircea Eliade), 36

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 21

¹⁴⁶ Gail Cooke

¹⁴⁷ Lule, 199

even if they do not, and that she is looking out for them and their interests. This message fosters a connection and a trust that helps smooth the delivery of an influential message.

Columns, like myths, also provide insight. Robert McKee, a screenwriting scholar and practitioner, writes that storytelling is “humanity’s prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life. Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living.”¹⁴⁸ Often, readers look to columnists for cues on how to process an event, an election, a natural disaster, a military intervention, and on and on. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred two years into Quindlen’s stint as a columnist for *Newsweek*. She wrote about the attacks in her column immediately following the devastating events, and revisited the feelings and fears evoked by the tragedy in her columns at several points in the years to follow. In her role as columnist, she took a set of events that boggled the mind of a country, which at that point had not been attacked on its own soil in 70 years – longer for the continental United States – and distilled them into several clear-cut themes: the notion of good triumphing over evil; the feeling of being utterly out of control; the potential to be forever jaded by the attacks; the effects of 9/11 on a generation of children; the products of evil within our own society; the attempt to use the experience as inspiration to be our best selves; and ultimately the forgetting of so many of these lessons just a few years later.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ R. McKee, 12

¹⁴⁹ Anna Quindlen. “Imagining The Hanson Family.” *Newsweek* 24 Sept. 2001. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Everything Is Under Control.” *Newsweek* 8 Oct. 2001. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Weren’t We All So Young Then?” *Newsweek* 31 Dec. 2001. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Young in a Year of Fear.” *Newsweek* 4 Nov. 2002. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “The Terrorists Here At Home.” *Newsweek* 17 Dec. 2001. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “We Are Here For Andrea.” *Newsweek* 22 Sept. 2003. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “American Forgetting.” *Newsweek* 17 Sept. 2007. Print.

Many of these themes feel timeless with regard to storytelling. While Quindlen is offering comfort and consolation to her readers at what felt like an unstable time on a horrifying topic, she is also attempting to use her influence as a columnist for two ends. First, to help her audience – and herself – think through the attacks and conceive of them in a particular way; in other words, to get her readers to see things as she sees them. Second, in several of these columns, she attempts to encourage her readers to transform their anger, sadness, and confusion into specific attitudes and actions: to not forget the day and the people and innocence lost, to continue to engage in service as a way to honor them, and to embrace and elevate the best of what it means to be an American – to Quindlen this includes the characteristics of audacity, community-mindedness, and the desire to make a positive impact – and to minimize the worst.

More than just providing valuable insight, columns – like myths – can also comfort readers, as exemplified above. Lule writes that myths “reconcile people to the seeming randomness of human existence,” which can be perceived and portrayed as cruel and unforgiving.¹⁵⁰ This is a particular strength of Quindlen’s, and it is also one of her goals – to comfort the afflicted – as noted in her own words above. She often writes about non-political topics in an effort to help her audience appreciate the beauty of life. A few examples include columns she wrote about the life lessons learned from an old dog, the wonder of Christmas memories, the mental benefits of writing, and the emotional benefits of spending time alone.¹⁵¹ Not only are the topics non-political, but they also reference and elucidate private sphere experiences.

¹⁵⁰ Lule, 43, 53

¹⁵¹ Anna Quindlen, “How An Old Dog Teaches Me Tricks About Life.” *Newsweek* 16 April 2007. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “The Time Machine.” *Newsweek* 25 Dec. 2006. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Write for Your

There is another benefit of myths, perhaps the most significant, that enables their tremendous power. Lule argues that myths are effective because the telling makes them feel true and irrefutable: “The stories of myth are not supposed to be understood as myth; they are supposed to seem real and natural.”¹⁵² One reason people trust stories is because stories *seem* true. This “naturalness” is self-perpetuating: stories seem real and true because they are based on recognizable tropes and therefore appear to *make sense*. Of course, by crafting these stories and tropes in the first place, humankind has literally *made* sense, creating it from scratch.¹⁵³ So while stories *seem true*, they are in actuality subjective communications transmitting a message of which the audience may or may not be conscious. Every story is an interpretation, despite coming off as indisputable and preordained.¹⁵⁴

As a columnist, Quindlen seems to understand this power and co-opts it in several ways. She tends to write using a matter-of-fact tone, subtly conveying to her audience that her version of the facts is *the* version of the facts, that morality is on her side, and that most people agree with her already. In some cases, as in her column about parental legal privilege, she does not bother to be subtle at all. Instead, she uses confident candor to state a belief that she understands is culturally taboo: “I would be fully prepared to lie under oath if I considered it to be the best thing for my kid, and I would consider that a more moral position than telling the truth. And I am certain I am in the majority.”¹⁵⁵

Life.” *Newsweek* 22 Jan. 2007. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Live Alone And Like It.” *Newsweek* 7 Aug. 2006. Print.

¹⁵² Lule, 118; echoed in Chatman, 49

¹⁵³ Lule, quoting Roland Barthes, 183; Duncombe, 18; Terry Threadgold, “Performing Theories of Narrative: Theorising Narrative Performance,” in Joanna Thornborrow and Jennifer Coates, eds. *The Sociolinguistics of Narrative*, (Amsterdam: Philadelphia J. Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 268-270

¹⁵⁴ Fisher, 49

¹⁵⁵ Anna Quindlen. “No Privilege for Parents.” *Newsweek* 16 Jan. 2000. Print.

Quindlen's trademark candor is something that will be explored further in the chapter to follow.

Interestingly, though she co-opts the benefits of myth, Quindlen questions the use of similar methods in several of her columns by taking the media to task for perpetuating "myths" about political issues and creating personas for political candidates. For instance, she attacks the broadly-accepted "stories" of conservative politicians, while simultaneously (and cleverly) spinning her own versions of the persons in question.¹⁵⁶

Concerning President Ronald Reagan, she writes:

Much of the coverage of the former president has done clumsily what he did with style: it has made the man the centerpiece and relegated those pesky political stands to the periphery... But it behooves us now to do precisely what Reagan himself once did: to separate the persona from the positions. The 40th president of the United States undoubtedly had great charm. He also, in the opinion of many, did great harm.¹⁵⁷

On the topic of the former Mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani, Quindlen uses the term "myth" to explain how his reputation changed after September 11, and is eager to correct the record: "In the wake of 9/11 Americans elsewhere may have come to see Rudy Giuliani as the calm voice of reason, but ... the real argument against Giuliani's candidacy is that he was uncommonly divisive and mean-spirited during his time in office, alienating most of the city's minority communities."¹⁵⁸

While myths can certainly work against the goals of a columnist if they codify a perspective different from hers, as in the examples above, the benefits of myth and

¹⁵⁶ Anna Quindlen. "We're Off to See the Wizard." *Newsweek* 28 Feb. 2000. Print.; Anna Quindlen. "Personality, Not Policy." *Newsweek* 21 Jun. 2004. Print.; Anna Quindlen. "Certain About the Unknown." *Newsweek* 11 Oct. 2007. Print.

¹⁵⁷ Quindlen. "Personality, Not Policy"

¹⁵⁸ Quindlen. "Certain About the Unknown"

storytelling hold much greater promise in their potential for amplifying the influence a columnist can have on her readers.

“The power I loved in this job was the power to do good: I mean, the power that was great was when you’d write a column about some welfare mother and somebody would call and say, ‘That woman sounds great - I’d like to interview her for a job.’ And you’d think, ‘Yes, I have earned my place on the planet for this month.’”

Anna Quindlen¹⁵⁹

Quindlen’s Columns as Educational and Influential

The studies cited in the previous section contradict one another in their attempt to quantify feelings, experiences, and cognitive activity that perhaps are unquantifiable. To measure the influence of Quindlen’s political writing over the course of her time at *Newsweek*, or over the course of her career, seems similarly elusive. Did she change minds? Did she change lives? Did she change the outcome of a ballot initiative or an election? Or did she impact the fundraising efforts of a nonprofit? Based on the reactions given by the reviewers of her political writing, some of which were highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, there is a level of influence felt by at least a portion of her readers.

If reader comments are to be believed, Quindlen at times influences the way one thinks about a topic by offering clarity, a previously unconsidered perspective, or an enlightening analogy. She positively impacts daily lives by presenting herself as someone who relates to others and their life experience. And she educates and informs on political topics, raising either one’s level of understanding or the profile of whatever

¹⁵⁹ Julia M. Klein, “Anna Quindlen Turns the Page,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 1994. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://articles.philly.com/1994-09-19/entertainment/25836206_1_anna-quindlen-true-thing-second-novel.

subject on which she writes. One Amazon.com reviewer, SanFrantastic, sees the power of Quindlen's writing to shape those who are exposed to it, wishing that more people would be, saying her "essays should be read by all, especially junior high and high school students who are forming their beliefs about ethics, morals, religion, politics, etc."¹⁶⁰

When asked by this scholar whether she has seen evidence of her columns having an impact or triggering a specific, tangible result, Quindlen mentions a few of her pieces to which readers have had a strong reaction. The first, an op-ed she wrote for the *New York Times* in 1993 called "The Power of One," argues that numbers and statistics that show how gay men and lesbians are mainstream Americans living mainstream lives are not what will move the needle on the debate over gay rights. Instead, she contends, the thing that will have the most significant impact on the acceptance of gays and lesbians as fully respected citizens, in the eyes of both culture and the law, is ordinary Americans getting to know them, working with them, being neighbors with them, and seeing for themselves that they are humans worthy of human rights.¹⁶¹ "I've been told many times by gay men and lesbians that they used [that] column...to come out to their families. It's been more than twenty years since I did that column, and it still happens, and it still always chokes me up."¹⁶² She mentions another column from 1994 called "Life After Death" that deals with the death of a loved one, the survivors they leave behind, and grief: "Therapists have told me they give [it] to patients. If you're human," Quindlen said, "that kind of thing makes you feel powerful and humbled at the same time."¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ SanFrantastic

¹⁶¹ Anna Quindlen, "Public & Private; The Power of One," *New York Times*, April 28, 1993. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/28/opinion/public-private-the-power-of-one.html>.

¹⁶² Quindlen, e-mail

¹⁶³ Anna Quindlen, "Public & Private; Life After Death," *New York Times*, May 4, 1994. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/04/opinion/public-private-life-after-death.html>.

From her time at *Newsweek*, a tremendously potent and honest article about the unspoken difficulties of parenting received a robust reaction from readers. Entitled “Playing God on No Sleep,” the article was written as a response to the news that a woman named Andrea Yates had murdered her five children. Quindlen notes that she received an “enormous outpouring from moms everywhere saying, finally someone is telling the truth about the work” of parenting.¹⁶⁴ In the column, Quindlen – as she so often does – addresses with total honesty the private, taboo thoughts people tend to have and never say out loud:

Every mother I've asked about the Yates case has the same reaction. She's appalled; she's aghast. And then she gets this look. And the look says that at some forbidden level she understands. The looks says that there are two very different kinds of horror here. There is the unimaginable idea of the killings. And then there is the entirely imaginable idea of going quietly bonkers in the house with five kids under the age of 7.¹⁶⁵

In the instances of these three columns, Quindlen influences the everyday lives of countless gay and lesbian readers, grieving readers, and readers with children. It is interesting that, when asked about the effects of her columns by this scholar and by other interviewers (see the quote, for instance, that precedes this section), Quindlen responds with examples that have had tangible effects on individual lives, as opposed to columns that might have helped turn the tide on a larger political issue. Tangible is absolutely the right word when discussing an impact that, even if it lasts just a few moments, grants the reader an avenue for moving forward, or a way to relate to another person, or a perspective that helps them heal, or a feeling of not being alone in a struggle. The term “material” works as well. Her writing on these subjects, based on the materiality of her

¹⁶⁴ Quindlen, e-mail

¹⁶⁵ Anna Quindlen, “Playing God on No Sleep,” *Newsweek* 2 Jul. 2001. Print.

experience, impacts the materiality of her audience. And for these readers, the columns achieve at least one aspect of her goal: to comfort the afflicted.

“Quindlen is so good that even when you disagree with what she says,
you still love the way she says it.”
*People Magazine*¹⁶⁶

Reception of Quindlen Across the Political Spectrum

What of her goal, then, to afflict the comfortable, as she does with many of her more political columns on controversial topics? How well are those pieces received? Quindlen’s writings undoubtedly skew liberal – at both the *Times* and *Newsweek*, Quindlen was hired to provide commentary from a liberal point of view. Just as with her style and voice, Quindlen learned that as a political writer, one can find readers and critics who disagree with one’s arguments from every corner of the political spectrum. A piece written by Marjorie Williams for *Vanity Fair* in 1994 suggests that Quindlen was actually not feminist enough, but was instead “an incorrigible nice girl: a powerful sixtyish white man’s idea of a feminist writer.” Williams argues that Quindlen’s columns and interrogations of affairs both national and international could have been more daring and more intellectual, and also dealt more heavily with traditionally “male” issues, as opposed to the private and the everyday. Williams believes that as an op-ed columnist for the nation’s most esteemed newspaper, Quindlen had the “journalistic equivalent of tenure at Harvard” and therefore could have pushed more boundaries with little risk.¹⁶⁷

Some critics find Quindlen’s style to be refreshingly different from the many male columnists with whom she is a contemporary, while simultaneously feeling consternation

¹⁶⁶ “Picks and Pans Review: Thinking Out Loud,” review of *Thinking Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen, *People*, May 17, 1993, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20110420,00.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Marjorie Williams, “The Story of the Good Girl,” *Reputation: Portraits of Power*, 2008, 167

about whether her focus on the personal does a disservice to the cause of elevating women in industries that are typically male-dominated. Writing in *The Harvard Crimson* about Quindlen's departure from the *Times* in 1994, Hallie Levine asks, "Was Quindlen's voice a refreshing addition to the *Times*, or a reinforcement of the stereotype that a woman only writes about the private sphere?"¹⁶⁸

While critics disagree on Quindlen's contributions as a feminist – both in her writing and in her career choices – her audience appears to come together on one crucial point: that readers of all political stripes can enjoy and benefit from the reading of Quindlen's columns. Amazon.com reviewer M. McKee explains, "I am living proof that one need not agree with Anna on politics to enjoy her writing. As a Republican, I find myself at odds with just about every political stance she takes, but I so admire her style of writing that I want to read on to see how she is going to present her ideas, and I am never disappointed by that presentation."¹⁶⁹ Reviewer Robert Finn echoes the sentiment, saying, "Even those who may disagree with her views, if they appreciate good writing, will enjoy reading [her work]."¹⁷⁰

Beyond appreciating her style, readers credit the way in which Quindlen finds unique ways to approach well-worn topics. Reviewer Paige Turns writes, "Whether you agree with her take on a subject or not, she always provides opportunity for thought,

¹⁶⁸ Hallie Z. Levine, "A Different Voice," *The Harvard Crimson*, September 24, 1994. Accessed November 9, 2015. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1994/9/24/a-different-voice-pi-first-discovered/>.

¹⁶⁹ M. McKee, "Sweet Inspiration," customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, July 21, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁷⁰ Robert Finn, "Entertaining, Thought-Provoking and Self-Assured," customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, April 18, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

some nuance or different angle you may not have considered.”¹⁷¹ E. Anderson adds, “Even if you don’t agree with everything you certain [sic] will come away with a deeper meaning.”¹⁷² A review in *People* magazine of her 1993 collection of political columns *Thinking Out Loud*, concurs: “Quindlen is so good that even when you disagree with what she says, you still love the way she says it.”¹⁷³ One reviewer not only shows appreciation for Quindlen’s style, but maintains that her style is what enables her message to have a more lasting effect on her audience:

Although Anna Quindlen’s views rarely veer off standard liberal-feminist territory, her reasons behind her opinions are refreshing. She deftly weaves her own personal experiences as well as the experiences of others into her commentaries. She does not rely on statistics or historical data, but on real life. It’s an unusual approach that allows her words to stick with the reader longer than that of typical opinion writers.¹⁷⁴

Perhaps Quindlen’s words do not change minds in each instance, but if her words “stick with the reader” beyond the moment of reading, there is a greater chance that her perspective on a matter may influence those of her audience members.

In the chapter to follow, an analysis of Quindlen’s collection of columns from her time at *Newsweek* will be presented. The style and voice that has been described above will be investigated in a more detailed manner in order to demonstrate concretely how

¹⁷¹ Paige Turns, “Food for Thought,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, August 19, 2006, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁷² E. Anderson, “Very well written,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, September 10, 2006, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

¹⁷³ *People* magazine, 1993

¹⁷⁴ TKP, “A Fresh Perspective,” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, August 15, 2000, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

Quindlen uses storytelling within her political writing to such effect that at the conclusion of a column her readers think, “Once again, Anna Quindlen nails it.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Midlodemocrat

“Never been a foreign correspondent. Only briefly an editor. No investigative work. All I had going for me was this determination to try to figure out the human condition.”
Anna Quindlen¹⁷⁶

CHAPTER THREE

Quindlen’s quality as a writer and storyteller does not appear to be questioned by critic nor reader. Some may not be fond of her style, but most agree that her ability to craft a story – and an argument – is a rare talent, and her commercial and career successes support such an opinion. Her skill in telling stories and her understanding of humanity, combined with an aptitude for engendering trust from her audience, are what pave the path for Quindlen’s columns to stir something in her readers. Once she earns readers’ trust, her words seek to impact her audience through a simultaneous reliance on and targeting of cultural values. This chapter will demonstrate how Quindlen’s writing uses cultural values as “evidence” for her arguments as she seeks to shape reader opinion on political topics, and how she works to build a foundation of trust beneath her messages.

This chapter will also clearly delineate three of Quindlen’s most prominent storytelling strategies. First, her knowledge and implementation of narrative structure within her columns enable Quindlen to engage and hold the attention of her audience, moving them toward a conclusive message. Second, her ability to trigger emotions in her audience allows her to deftly resolve them, leaving readers with a feeling of satisfaction at the column’s end. And third, her skill in conveying and evoking empathy makes the subject matter relatable to an audience and elicits an investment in the topic from the reader. Finally, the chapter will consider whether Quindlen’s approach limits her ability

¹⁷⁶ Quindlen, e-mail

to address the nuances of difference in order to relate to a larger audience. To begin, however, the following section will offer an overview of narrative structure.

Narrative Structure

In order to recognize the use of storytelling elements within a piece of writing, such as Anna Quindlen's columns, one must have an understanding of the common elements of story structure. A familiarity with commonsensical narrative structure and the Hero's Quest enable the close reading and textual analysis necessary for establishing whether Quindlen's use of storytelling elements strengthens the delivery of her political arguments. As schema theory contends, a story's structure is just as powerful, if not more so, than its contents. Robert McKee maintains that in order to incite an "absolute and irrefutable change" in the audience, a story must be believable, and that all the "proof" that the storyteller need provide is the *structure of the story* itself.¹⁷⁷ In other words, what makes a story believable is the way in which the parts of a story relate to and build upon the parts that came before it. Certain elements or plot points of a story function in such a way as to inform what an audience will expect from the story as it unfolds. This structure is universally familiar, and it is what makes it possible for a storyteller to lead the audience toward a meaningful and satisfying conclusion.¹⁷⁸

What is the typical structure of a Western story? While stories can be communicated and consumed in a range of forms – from television to paintings to pop music – there exists between them a common substratum. Without this, Seymour Chatman maintains, "we could not explain the transformation of 'Sleeping Beauty' into a

¹⁷⁷ R. McKee, 113

¹⁷⁸ Campbell, 28; also, Barry Keith Grant, "Introduction," *Film Genre Reader, Volume III* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2003).

movie, a ballet, a mime show.” A common structure can be found within each of these varied forms, and it is how one can identify a story as a story.¹⁷⁹

The benefit of this structure is that it is infinitely variable but always the same, because every story is the story of *the Quest*.¹⁸⁰ A highly regarded scholar of the universal form of myth, Joseph Campbell outlines the standard pathway of the quest: “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” – Separation, Initiation, Return. McKee breaks this down further, defining story in five parts: the Inciting Incident, Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax, Resolution.¹⁸¹

The Separation and the Inciting Incident are one and the same. Campbell describes this first event as one in which the protagonist is shown – by accident or by coincidence – a world she did not know existed heretofore. It is at that point that the protagonist is “drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood.” What she knew to be true before does not apply in this new world, and she must face new challenges and learn new lessons in order to survive and return to the previous world as a changed person.¹⁸²

This journey, and the change that happens as a result, is highly satisfying to an audience. The Inciting Incident is the structure’s first trigger, which causes the audience to ask, “How is this going to turn out?”¹⁸³ Progressive Complications mount the tension, separating the protagonist further and further away from the goal until it reaches a point of Crisis. The Crisis is also known as the “obligatory scene” because the audience has

¹⁷⁹ Chatman, 9, 20

¹⁸⁰ R. McKee, 20, 196; Mandler, 22

¹⁸¹ Campbell, 28; R. McKee, 181

¹⁸² Campbell, 42-43

¹⁸³ R. McKee, 198

been cued all along to anticipate it, and therefore the storyteller is obligated to share it.¹⁸⁴ This is one way in which the storyteller can provoke emotional satisfaction. The story's Climax follows, and is directly linked with the Inciting Incident; the Inciting Incident is the story's cause, and the Climax is its inevitable effect.¹⁸⁵ The Climax is crucial, maintains McKee, for "without it, you have no story. Until you have it, your characters wait like suffering patients praying for a cure."¹⁸⁶

Does this mean that the audience will know exactly where they are being taken before they get there? Yes and no. Two vital characteristics allow the storyteller to keep the attention of the audience. First, the unexpected – provoked by the Inciting Incident, an audience knows what it wants to happen, but wants to be surprised by *how* it happens. The unexpected provides a source of energy to the story.¹⁸⁷ Second, a sense of tension – a cycle of tension and release, a pace that speeds up and slows down, enhances the audience's reaction to the story, leaving them "emotionally exhausted but fulfilled" by an ending that seems inevitable.¹⁸⁸

The "strategic sequence" described above not only provokes certain emotions, it also conveys the storyteller's unique perspective on life.¹⁸⁹ In other words, there is, within every story, an opinion being communicated. There is a *meaning* to every story; there is a point. And it is the common structure that enables the storyteller to lead the audience to this point, helps them understand the point, and finally convinces them of the point.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 198-9

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 288

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 309

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 178-9

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 288, 290-1

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 33; echoed by Erstad & Wertsch, 29

¹⁹⁰ Campbell, 28

It is important to acknowledge that the typical narrative structure as described above has been critiqued by feminist narratologists as “masculinist.” Within the broad discipline of feminist narrative theory, its practitioners interrogate texts from a feminist perspective in terms of both content and narrative structure, questioning concepts that include the laws of genre and the stability and universality of certain forms of narrative.¹⁹¹ Regarding structure, Margaret Homans explains that closed endings (versus open), sequential narration (versus non-linear), and narrative progression (versus stasis) have been coded as male-identified.¹⁹² Robyn Warhol, a prominent scholar in the field, casts the Hero’s Quest as Oedipal, wherein the protagonist is male and the goal he seeks is female.¹⁹³ In comparison, “female plots” can be non-linear, exhibit multiple climaxes, and resist narrative closer.¹⁹⁴

However, some scholars see these definitions as too simple. As the discipline expands and ages, there is less consensus about what constitutes a masculine narrative as opposed to a feminine one. In *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology*, Ruth Page shows that many of the prior assumptions of “masculine” and “feminine” approaches to storytelling do not always apply to a work under analysis, and can be limiting in their reliance on binary possibilities.¹⁹⁵ There is also conjecture concerning the benefits of capitalizing on traditional “masculine” structure as a strategy

¹⁹¹ Kathy Mezei, “Introduction: Contextualizing Feminist Narratology,” *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. Kathy Mezei (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5

¹⁹² Margaret Homans, “Feminist Fictions and Feminist Theories of Narrative,” *Narrative* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1994)

¹⁹³ Robyn Warhol, “Introduction: A Feminist Approach to Narrative” in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, eds. James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Robyn Warhol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).

¹⁹⁴ Ruth E. Page, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 22

¹⁹⁵ Page, *Feminist Narratology*, 82-3

for being heard and breaking into the space of public discourse.¹⁹⁶ Perhaps there is value in using traditional narrative structure for the liberation of oppressed social groups, a tactic that could potentially serve feminist ends.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Quindlen's style combines both masculine and feminine approaches to narrative, which perhaps supports Page's assertion that searching for and attempting to identify gender differences in narrative should be minimized in favor of a focus on the complications and nuances of variation within narrow narrative categories.¹⁹⁷ More examples of how Quindlen deftly intertwines aspects of the two approaches will be revealed in sections to follow, wherein her more than 200 columns for *Newsweek* will be analyzed for her use of story.

Targeting the Readers' Values

Narrative structure enables a storyteller to lead her audience on a quest alongside a protagonist, and it is the quest that takes the reader's mind on a journey toward a transition of values. Values are the target. They are not framed in political terms – pro- or anti-Head Start or pro- or anti-farm subsidies. They are cultural values, as discussed in the introductory chapter, but they are so deeply ingrained that they can *feel* like human values: the golden rule; taking the high road; charity; sympathy; forgiveness; love. As concepts they are so broad that it may be harder to find specific fault with them. They are the forces throughout our daily lives and behind our decision-making.

Humans are taught these values from an early age – through stories, primarily. And so it makes stories all the more helpful to columnists for tapping into the cultural

¹⁹⁶ Mezei, 7

¹⁹⁷ Page, *Feminist Narratology*, 116

values that can serve as evidence for a political point. The audience comes to each story with their own values. A storyteller seeks to shape the values of the audience by targeting the values the audience is assumed to have. Fisher is particularly interested in the targeting of values in rhetorical communication. He asserts that, in terms of decision-making, “the role of values in the constitution of knowledge, truth, or reality has been generally denied,” and that conversely the role of logic has been overblown.¹⁹⁸ “The concept of narrative rationality asserts that it is not the *individual form* of argument that is ultimately persuasive in discourse,” he writes. “That is important, but *values* are more persuasive, and they may be expressed in a variety of modes, of which argument is only one.”¹⁹⁹ Long after statistics shift and facts are disproved, stories and the values they represent remain unchanged and unquestioned. Early quantitative communication research by Carl Hovland underscores this, suggesting that it is unlikely for communications to change deeply-held beliefs or attitudes.²⁰⁰ All the more reason for a columnist to rely upon those immutable beliefs as support for her argument.

How does Quindlen seek to shape the political opinions of her readership without alienating those who are not as liberally-minded? She does this by targeting their values. Her readers seem to find her use of this tactic efficacious. On Amazon.com, SanFrantastic maintains that Quindlen’s writing provides “a humanistic point of view that...represents in its totality the true spirit of the American people,” and that her opinions are inspired by the values of “compassion and empathy, not the rules of

¹⁹⁸ Fisher, xiii, 35

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 48

²⁰⁰ C. I. Hovland, “Reconciling Conflicting Results Derived from Experimental and Survey Studies of Attitude Change,” *American Psychologist*, 14 (1959), 8-17.

religious institutions or political parties.”²⁰¹ A reviewer with the handle Lily Bart states that it is Quindlen’s “grasp of middle-American values...and her insistence on humanity and compassion” that set her apart.²⁰²

Examples of her reliance on values include a column about welfare reform, wherein Quindlen encourages the reader to recall the universally-upheld morals of the stories with which Americans are familiar, such as do unto others and help those less fortunate.²⁰³ In an article about end-of-life issues, and specifically the joint suicide of an old married couple, Quindlen portrays love as the ultimate justification of any action – in this case, love for each other, love for one’s children, and love for treasured pastimes.²⁰⁴ In contrast, she uses the negative values of evil and cruelty to condemn violent abortion protesters and compares their political goals to that of the 9/11 terrorists.²⁰⁵ The messages here are these: if a reader believes love is good, then that person should support the choice to end one’s own suffering late in life; if a reader believes evil intentions are bad, then that person should disavow pro-life extremists.

Similarly, Quindlen argues that if a reader believes in the American Dream, then by extension that person should believe in liberalism. She contends that Obama’s against-all-odds ascent from a mixed-race child raised by a single mother to an extremely successful and prominent politician (and ultimately to the first black President of the United States) “was possible in some substantial measure because of a movement

²⁰¹ SanFrantastic

²⁰² Lily Bart, “Strong-Willed, Sexy, Self-Confident Anna Quindlen -- A Feminist Firebrand For the Ages!,” customer review of *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public and the Private*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, September 27, 2007, http://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Out-Loud-Personal-Political/dp/0449909050/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1439324561&sr=8-1&keywords=anna+quindlen+thinking+out+loud (Accessed August 8, 2015).

²⁰³ Anna Quindlen, “Staring Across a Great Divide.” *Newsweek* 1 Jul. 2002. Print.

²⁰⁴ Anna Quindlen, “In a Peaceful Frame of Mind.” *Newsweek* 4 Feb. 2002. Print.

²⁰⁵ Quindlen, “The Terrorists Here At Home”

devoted to replacing the status quo with something fairer, greater, different. According to the dictionary, and to history as well, that movement was, and remains, liberalism.”²⁰⁶

Stories influence a culture’s beliefs, while simultaneously making those beliefs seem natural and given.²⁰⁷ Stories create order out of a disorderly existence and allow us, as scholar Stephen Duncombe says, to *make* sense.²⁰⁸ In this way, the columnist as storyteller serves the function of a counselor, dealing in the “territory of life as it ought to be lived,” writes Fisher, and providing “a guide to belief and action.”²⁰⁹ This is precisely what Quindlen, as a columnist and storyteller, attempts to do. Using her aptitude and understanding of narrative structure, empathy, and the need for trust, she writes in order to shape values, change minds, and possibly even spur political action.

“Who would read a columnist she didn’t trust?”
Anna Quindlen²¹⁰

Engendering Trust as a Columnist

Trust is the crucial piece of the puzzle that allows for the possibility that a storyteller might change minds, and an audience’s trust is not automatic. An additional hurdle for a political columnist is to contend with the issue of a persisting mistrust of rhetorical communication in general. This mistrust is based on its perceived exploitation of emotion and the role emotion plays in decision-making. The mistrust is rooted in the awareness that the ability to persuade an audience of a certain position – to convince them to believe what they are being told – is a potent tool. Possessing it provides the

²⁰⁶ Anna Quindlen, “A Leap Into the Possible.” *Newsweek* 9 Aug. 2004. Print.

²⁰⁷ Lule, 183

²⁰⁸ Duncombe, 18

²⁰⁹ Fisher, 73

²¹⁰ Quindlen, e-mail

communicator with the opportunity to exercise power over others. Power is often mistrusted. Therefore, so are the forms of communication that help amass it, which is precisely why the ancient Greeks looked upon rhetoric with suspicion, reasoning that one can be persuaded of a lie just as easily as one can be persuaded of the truth.²¹¹

More specifically, exercising power over another's emotions is mistrusted. Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle believed that persuasion was based on the three considerations: the communicator's trustworthiness and character, or *ethos*; a rational and reasoned argument, or *logos*; and the emotions of the audience, or *pathos*.²¹² In other words, he believed emotion played a significant role in whether a speaker could successfully persuade an audience.

For these reasons, Marcus Tullius Cicero implored his contemporaries to play on the audience's emotion as part of their efforts to be persuasive. Successful rhetoric, Cicero believed, depended on it.²¹³ In *De Oratore*, Cicero wrote, "For men decide far more problems by hate, or love, or lust, or rage, or sorrow, or joy, or hope, or fear, or illusion, or some other inward emotion, than by reality, or authority, or any legal standard, or judicial precedent, or statute."²¹⁴ He understood that the changing of minds is a process that occurs on many levels. Stories are effective as a type of communication

²¹¹ Gary Remer, "Cicero and the Ethics of Deliberative Rhetoric," in Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, & Gary Remer, eds., *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric & Democracy* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

²¹² M. Miceli, F. Rosis and I. Poggi, "Emotional and Non-Emotional Persuasion." *Applied Artificial Intelligence*. November 2006; 20(10), 855

²¹³ David DeSteno, Richard E. Petty, Derek D. Rucker, Duane T. Wegener, and Julia Braverman, "Attitudes and Social Cognition - Discrete Emotions and Persuasion: the Role of Emotion-Induced Expectancies." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 86.1 (2004), 43

²¹⁴ Fisher, 37

because they communicate to audiences on a number of levels at once. Narrative successfully intertwines the rational and the emotional.²¹⁵

However, the blatant targeting of emotions is often found to be at odds with modern values that are based on principles from the Enlightenment. These principles prioritize a reliance on reason and rational action.²¹⁶ Even two thousand years ago, long before the Enlightenment took place, Cicero's opinions on the art of persuasion were controversial. Plato found rhetoric to be amoral at best and immoral at worst, while Socrates argued that because rhetoric was not bound by rational argument, an orator might argue as easily for falsehood as for truth, or for wrong instead of right.²¹⁷ In response, Cicero maintained that the ends justified the means; that orators must use morally questionable techniques to reach moral ends for the public's benefit, and that they can achieve this by triggering impulses and emotions in their audience, rather than judgment and deliberation.²¹⁸

Some of today's scholars also suggest that emotions can make an argument feel relatable to an audience.²¹⁹ Or, as Duncombe points out, the power of a story can be that it makes facts altogether moot: "A journey of emotions rather than an argument of fact, [a story's] appeal is not cognitive, but primal."²²⁰ He uses the example of the political hot-button issue of creationism versus evolution, which, to those relying upon scientific data may seem like an open-and-shut case. Despite this, the debate regarding evolution

²¹⁵ R. McKee, 111

²¹⁶ Duncombe, 4

²¹⁷ Remer

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Lule, 12

²²⁰ Duncombe, 98

rages on because, as Duncombe writes, “one side has the evidence, the other the compelling narrative.”²²¹

The mistrust of rhetorical communication is a hurdle for political columnists. However, if a columnist employs strategies of storytelling, she may be able to counteract that mistrust by capitalizing on the benefit of stories “seeming” true, as discussed in the previous chapter.²²² Additionally, storytellers boast the advantage of being culturally regarded as counselors who are trusted not only to communicate information, but to make suggestions as to how life should be lived. People rely on storytellers to unmask truths and explain the meaning of those truths.²²³ This general impression of storytellers as counselors and authorities can have a cognitive effect, according to Richard E. Petty and Pablo Briñol. Describing it as a “source factor,” they contend that source factors can influence the success of a persuasive communication by cuing recipients to process the message peripherally. When the communicator is considered trustworthy, a message is processed less carefully. In a study they conducted, Petty and Briñol found that participants had more confidence in their own thoughts concerning the message, relied on their thoughts more heavily, and were ultimately more persuaded by it.²²⁴

Nevertheless, columnists must work to gain the audience’s trust in a number of ways. First, their stories must pass the tests of the audience. Fisher explains that humans have an awareness of what makes a story coherent, or whether the events of a story fall within the confines of narrative probability. Humans also test narrative fidelity by comparing a story to their own life to determine whether a story comports with things

²²¹ Ibid., 19

²²² Lule, quoting Roland Barthes, 183; Duncombe, 18

²²³ R. McKee, 254

²²⁴ Richard Petty and Pablo Briñol, “Psychological Processes Underlying Persuasion.” *Diogenes*. 55.1 (2008).

they have experienced. Mandler refers to this as “plausibility.” In order to be trusted, a storyteller must present a story with narrative probability and narrative fidelity. This takes skill, both in terms of exercising one’s knowledge of narrative structure and in terms of understanding human nature, which allows for the development of plotlines and characterizations (e.g., desires, motivations) that resonate with one’s audience culturally and morally.

For an audience member, belief in the story contributes to trust in the storyteller. And in storytelling, trust and empathy go hand-in-hand. According to McKee, these two elements determine how emotionally involved in a story an audience will become. He explains: “First, empathy: identification with the protagonist that draws us into the story, vicariously rooting for our own desires in life. Second, authenticity: *We must believe...*”²²⁵ In fact, the extent to which an audience will believe is quite vast. As long as they feel that the motivation behind an action is commensurate with the action itself, no action is too implausible.²²⁶ However, while an audience will suspend their disbelief easily for a movie or novel, journalists are in another category altogether and must contend with their profession’s less-than-stellar reputation. “Even journalists don’t trust their fellow journalists,” claims Lule.²²⁷ Trust in the media tends to be low, even more so when the content is persuasive, possibly because Americans continue to assume in spite of evidence to the contrary that media represents and should attain a standard of unbiased reporting.²²⁸

²²⁵ R. McKee, 186

²²⁶ Ibid., 370

²²⁷ Lule, 4

²²⁸ Ibid., 4

When encountering opinion journalism, the audience will test its veracity in a number of ways. In this case the *art* of opinion journalism determines a column's success more than any quantifiable science. Fisher states that "the values of technical precision are not as important as the values of coherence, truthfulness, wisdom, and humane action, which are necessary for transforming technical logic and empirical knowledge into a force for civilized existence."²²⁹ Readers test narrative material for coherence – or, as Fisher says, whether a story "hangs together" – and fidelity, defined as truthfulness and reliability. Coherence is tested in three ways: by its narrative structure, or internal consistency; by its relation to the world as we know it, or external consistency; and by the believability of its characters, or consistency with humanity."²³⁰

Fisher explains that the audience will test these components of a story based on life experience and individual "logic of good reasons."²³¹ The most important of these tests is that of character believability: "Central to all stories is character. Whether a story is believable depends on the reliability of characters, both as narrators and as actors... Coherence in life and in literature requires that characters behave characteristically... Determining a character's motives is prerequisite to trust, and trust is the foundation of belief."²³² In other words, the storyteller's understanding of humanity is the key to his or her success. Without it, they will not earn the trust of the audience, and readers will dismiss their message.

Quindlen's proficiency in presenting believable characterizations and producing empathetic responses in her audience is evident. She also relies on some traditional

²²⁹ Fisher, 48

²³⁰ Ibid., 47

²³¹ Ibid., 47

²³² Ibid., 47

strategies, such as calling upon historical examples to provoke cognition in her readers to support her point. When asked what she does to establish trust with her readership, Quindlen states, “Obviously I make certain my work is factually accurate and I admit it if I get something wrong. I try to consider all permutations of an argument before making my own, and I’ve usually done a fair amount of reporting before I do, even if you don’t see it in the column. Reporting is like the basement; without it your house will blow right over.”²³³ There are many other ways in which Quindlen works to gain the trust of her readership, approaches she believes have more impact than reporting and accuracy: “I think they sensed an authenticity and an earnestness in the work, a passion for making sense of the world that made them think I wouldn’t lie about what I was thinking and feeling.”²³⁴ She writes with brutal honesty, making the calculation that if she shows that she will be truthful about issues that are either taboo or self-effacing, her readers will assume her honesty on other subjects. These strategies will be considered below, along with another: how Quindlen coaxes her audience to let their guard down by connecting with them on non-political topics.

Time and again throughout her columns, Quindlen utilizes historic examples to bolster her argument. In an article comparing the effectiveness of qualitative and quantitative evidence, Dean Kazoleas explains that audience perceptions of a communication source can be influenced by the types of evidence upon which the source relies, whether they take the form of concrete examples, rhetorical tropes such as analogies or metaphors, or statistical data.²³⁵ As malleable and disputable as history is, it is still revered by the average person as immutable, and therefore to be trusted. Quindlen

²³³ Quindlen, e-mail

²³⁴ Quindlen, e-mail

²³⁵ Kazoleas, 41, 42.

valorizes history by quoting historical figures and placing them on a pedestal, and then implying that they would agree with her point, something that is impossible to prove.²³⁶ She also uses historical context to urge readers to see things differently. In a column on the censorship of purportedly “blasphemous” art and literature, Quindlen uses examples of now-celebrated pieces that were trashed by critics and leaders at the time of their debut and currently hang in European museums as part of the most famous art collections.²³⁷ In defending then-Senate candidate Barack Obama’s “liberal” positions, she first defines the term and then uses historical context to soften it: “It’s worth remembering that today’s moderate values were the liberal notions of yesteryear. Social Security. Integrated schools. A war on poverty.”²³⁸

Another strategy employed by Quindlen to engender trust is her candor, part of her signature style as a columnist. She admits the things that are hard to admit and says out loud the things one is taught not to say. Reviewers on Amazon.com make note of this often. “Ms. Quindlen doesn’t sugarcoat her feelings – you know where she stands,” writes Paige Turns.²³⁹ A reviewer from Indian Prairie Public Library observes, that Quindlen “gets to the heart of the matter – she articulates the truths – of the contemporary social and political scene.”²⁴⁰ E. Anderson was similarly struck: “I am utterly amazed at how well [Quindlen] writes and is able to say the things that should be said.”²⁴¹

²³⁶ Anna Quindlen, “Overhearing the Agenda.” *Newsweek* 11 Nov. 2006. Print.; Anna Quindlen. “A Bit of Advice: Don’t Go There!” *Newsweek* 13 Feb. 2000. Print.

²³⁷ Anna Quindlen, “Sound and Fury, Signifying Zip.” *Newsweek* 10 Oct. 1999. Print.

²³⁸ Quindlen, “A Leap Into the Possible”

²³⁹ Paige Turns

²⁴⁰ Indian Prairie Public Library, “Loved it!” customer review of *Loud and Clear*, by Anna Quindlen, *Amazon.com*, August 27, 2010, http://www.amazon.com/Loud-Clear-Anna-Quindlen/dp/0812970276/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_z (Accessed August 8, 2015).

²⁴¹ E. Anderson

One of the more striking examples of her ability to courageously address head on the elephant in the room is in her column on Andrea Yates, whose drowning of her five children made national news in 2001.²⁴² In the column, which was mentioned in the previous chapter as one that readers continue to cite as one they find particularly moving, Quindlen admits that, given how difficult parenting can be, it is easy to see how it could push a mother of five over the edge.²⁴³ Quindlen has been chided by critics for seeming too perfect or being too perfect. Marjorie Williams, in her profile of Quindlen, reports, “Others believe that Quindlen works with zeal at creating this picture of Superwoman.”²⁴⁴ But how true can that be when she admits in a column that she can relate to a woman who drowned her five children in a bathtub? Quindlen speaks the unspeakable and her readers appreciate her for it.

Quindlen speaks the unspeakable with regard to abortion, too, discussing it as something women consider and experience, rather than the all-or-nothing political terms in which it is normally couched. She breaks the rules of the pro-life movement by refusing to call it murder. But she also breaks the rules of the pro-choice movement, with which she identifies, by conceding points to the pro-life camp. On the topic of whether late-term abortions are “worse” than abortions performed in the early stages of pregnancy, she writes, “By seeming to lump these abortions with other, earlier ones, we have lost credibility. Because that is clearly not how reasonable people see this.” In the same piece, she tenderly and genuinely writes about abortion in a way that activists never would, yet in a way that resonates so much more with individual experience:

²⁴² “Woman Not Guilty in Retrial in the Deaths of Her 5 Children,” *The Associated Press* (New York, NY) 27 July 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/27/us/27yates.html?_r=1&ref=andreayates (Accessed 16 March 2012).

²⁴³ Quindlen, “Playing God on No Sleep”

²⁴⁴ M. Williams, 170

As sophisticated sonograms become more widely used, as it is possible to see the face of a fetus clearly, it will become ever more important to be painfully honest about what really happens here. Something dies when an abortion is performed. It is not yet a baby. It is not remotely anyone else's business. But something does die. In the tension between woman and fetus, the woman has the right to choose. But she cannot really choose to ignore that there are two important parts to this equation. Biology tells her so.²⁴⁵

Here she hopes to demonstrate that she can be honest about the gray areas of an issue and still have a clear-cut opinion, and that she can be trusted to provide her readers with information even when it does not serve her argument.

Another example of Quindlen's candor is the way in which she scolds her own profession, admitting the faults of an industry of which she is very much a part. She takes the media to task for printing and promoting salacious gossip – and even admits that she has at times been caught up in it.²⁴⁶ She chastises the media for trying to create news by declaring political winners and losers before elections have even taken place.²⁴⁷ She shatters the myth of an objective press, asserting that reporters recycle and reify each other's opinion, most of which are based on insular Washington, D.C. "inside the beltway" perspectives²⁴⁸ – and then reprimands the media for foolishly attempting to appear objective to the point of slanting their own work, claiming that "reporters have become so paranoid about accusations of bias that they work almost reflexively to refute it, frequently to the detriment of liberal institutions."²⁴⁹

Quindlen rebukes the media for making itself the topic of the news too often, asking "Can media self-examination (and self-flagellation) really mean much to a single

²⁴⁵ Anna Quindlen, "Not A Womb in the House." *Newsweek* 16 Nov. 2003. Print.

²⁴⁶ Anna Quindlen, "Gossip in the Age of Anna Nicole." *Newsweek* 5 Mar. 2007. Print.

²⁴⁷ Anna Quindlen, "The End of Apathy." *Newsweek* 12 Jan. 2008. Print.; Quindlen, "Certain About the Unknown"

²⁴⁸ Anna Quindlen. "Journalism 101: Human Nature." *Newsweek* 15 Nov. 1999. Print.; Anna Quindlen, "Stepping Aside." *Newsweek* 2 May 2009. Print.; Quindlen. "Certain About the Unknown"

²⁴⁹ Anna Quindlen, "Why Even Try the Imitation?" *Newsweek* 28 Jul. 2003. Print.

mom with a mortgage and three kids who is wondering about interest rates and gas prices?”²⁵⁰ And she calls on the media to be better than all this, cover more meaningful issues, and stop relying upon “playground-bully punditry”.²⁵¹ “It’s cheap and easy to say the public cannot handle anything more than sound bites... They know how to pay attention if they’re offered stories to which attention must be paid.”²⁵² This approach shows the reader that Quindlen will call it like she sees it, even when it does not reflect well on her and her profession. In a way, these rebukes are her confession, allowing her to cleanse herself in the eyes of her audience.

Finally, Quindlen seeks to build trust with her audience by establishing a connection with them outside of politics. One of her favorite topics is that of parenting, which she wrote about many times throughout her decade as a columnist for *Newsweek*. She laid bare her soul on several occasions, writing about the difficulties of parenting, children leaving home, children as one’s legacy, the responsibilities of parenting, and being inspired by her daughter.²⁵³ As mentioned earlier, other apolitical columns include pieces on pets, the holidays, and the benefits of writing and spending time alone.²⁵⁴ Quindlen writes about these simple and universal subjects with no intention of persuading anyone of anything, and alternates columns of this nature with more serious political writing in order to create a comforting external rhythm to her work and with the hope that her audience will let down their guard and let in her message as a result. When asked by

²⁵⁰ Anna Quindlen, “Mortal Kombat, Election Level.” *Newsweek* 4 Oct. 2004. Print.

²⁵¹ Anna Quindlen, “Political Pundits Must Rise Up.” *Newsweek* 19 Mar. 2007. Print.

²⁵² Quindlen, “Mortal Kombat, Election Level”

²⁵³ Quindlen, “Playing God on No Sleep”; Anna Quindlen, “Why Do We Pretend Parenting is Easy?” *Newsweek* 18 Apr. 2009. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Home Cooking.” *Newsweek* 23 Feb. 2008. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Flown Away, Left Behind.” *Newsweek* 12 Jan. 2004. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “A New Roof on an Old House.” *Newsweek* 5 Jun. 2000. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “In Search of a Grown-Up.” *Newsweek* 26 Aug. 2002. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “I’ll Never Stop Saying Maria.” *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 2004. Print.

²⁵⁴ Quindlen, “How An Old Dog Teaches Me Tricks About Life”; Quindlen, “The Time Machine”; Quindlen, “Write for Your Life”; Quindlen, “Live Alone And Like It”

this scholar if she is conscious of the external rhythm of her columns – for example, if she wrote a particularly hard-hitting or controversial column one week, would she purposefully focus on a more light-hearted topic the following week – Quindlen responded in the affirmative. “Absolutely. A change-up pitch, I always called it, thereby exhausting my available sports metaphors. Columnists can so easily become predictable: oh, here's Anna Quindlen on women's rights again. You want to surprise the reader a little bit.”²⁵⁵ The lighter, more personal columns helped her cultivate a relationship with her readers, as evidenced in this post by Sunny Hersh, a reviewer on Amazon.com: “You trust her because her values and love for her family shine through.”²⁵⁶

A chronological review of the topics of her bi-weekly *Newsweek* column reveals two notable breaks in light-hearted writing: the first, in the seven months following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the second, the ten months leading up to the 2004 Presidential election between then-President George W. Bush and his challenger, Senator John Kerry. During each of these time periods, she wrote only one piece on what could be considered a non-serious topic. The chronological review also indicates a period of many light-hearted subjects in 2006 and the first half of 2007 that, coincidentally or not, occurred during a period of economic prosperity in America. These time periods possibly reflect Quindlen’s mood, that of the nation’s, or both.

Quindlen’s Use of Narrative Structure

At this point in the chapter the focus will shift to a few of the ways in which Quindlen uses narrative structure to connect with her readership. Some of Quindlen’s

²⁵⁵ Quindlen, e-mail

²⁵⁶ Sunny Hersh

reliance on storytelling strategies are obvious. For instance, in a column about Hurricane Katrina and humanity's failed relationship with nature, Quindlen invokes the flood myth, a trope Lule has found to be used throughout time as the "ultimate morality tale."²⁵⁷ She questions the myth of the American Dream and the myth of pulling oneself up by one's boot straps in a column about homelessness and the working poor.²⁵⁸ She calls upon the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* in order to make a point about the severity of gossip in the media.²⁵⁹ And she describes history as a story, writing that "history is most often written in terms of inventions and events, revolutions and revolutionary ideas. But it is always essentially the story of people."²⁶⁰

These are all transparent uses of story. However, most of the ways in which Quindlen makes effective use of the principles of storytelling in her political column are not quite so obvious. Under consideration in the sections to follow are three strategies in particular: Quindlen's understanding and use of narrative structure in her columns to engage and emotionally satisfy her readers; her talent for inducing empathy; and her reliance on heroes to make the personal political.

Perhaps because Quindlen is a best-selling novelist, and therefore a professional storyteller, she makes skilled use of the principles of narrative structure as a political columnist in order to communicate with her readership and lead them toward a conclusion she has formed on its topic. The first part of any narrative structure is the introduction or preface, wherein the storyteller orients her audience. In her biweekly column for *Newsweek*, Quindlen is a master of the introduction. She uses the first

²⁵⁷ Lule, 173; Anna Quindlen, "A Shock to The System." *Newsweek* 25 Aug. 2003. Print.

²⁵⁸ Anna Quindlen, "A New Kind Of Poverty." *Newsweek* 1 Dec. 2003. Print.

²⁵⁹ Quindlen, "Gossip in the Age of Anna Nicole"

²⁶⁰ Anna Quindlen, "Now It's Time for Generation Next." *Newsweek* 1 Jan. 2000. Print.

paragraph of her limited space to set the stage and induce a mood in order to let the audience know what type of message they will receive – happy, sad, angering, introspective, or other.²⁶¹ But it is also to grasp their attention with the hope of maintaining it throughout the column. The introduction may distract, it may entertain, but it must grab hold of the readers in a way that inspires them to keep reading, otherwise the columnist has no chance of communicating her political point and potentially wielding political influence.

Quindlen employs various techniques, but one she uses often for her column introductions is to tell a story from her own childhood. Critic Marjorie Williams posits, Quindlen’s “stock-in-trade is the vignette, the personal anecdote that illumines a larger truth.”²⁶² This is particularly evident when the subject of the column is gender equality.²⁶³ As a baby boomer, Quindlen’s generation of women witnessed and continues to fight for a vast amount of social progress, and anecdotes from her youth are an effective way to demonstrate how much has changed in just a few decades. Anecdotes also work to trigger an emotional response that can be shared by, and therefore foster unity of, the readership.²⁶⁴ In a column about the effects of 9/11 on children, she uses a story about the subdued Thanksgiving she and her family celebrated just days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in order to evoke an eerie and somber mood.²⁶⁵ In a column about the acrimonious tenor of political campaigns, she uses six short sentences about the games of her childhood as compared to the violent video games

²⁶¹ R. McKee, 311; Thornborrow and Coates, 4-5

²⁶² Williams, 171

²⁶³ Anna Quindlen, “Still Stuck in Second.” *Newsweek* 8 Mar. 2008. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Mary Todd Lincoln’s Other Story.” *Newsweek* 21 Feb. 2009. Print.

²⁶⁴ Page, *Feminist Narratology*, 81

²⁶⁵ Quindlen, “Young in a Year of Fear”

of today in order to incite the same cringing feeling that nasty, media-driven political fights arouse.²⁶⁶ And in a column about homelessness and the working poor, she sets the scene masterfully in four sentences so powerful one can almost feel the cold:

Winter flits in and out of New York City in the late fall, hitching a ride on the wind that whips the Hudson River. One cold morning not long ago, just as day was breaking, six men began to shift beneath their blankets under a stone arch up a rise from the water. In the shadow of the newest castle-in-the-air skyscraper midwived by the Baron Trump, they gathered their possessions. An hour later they had vanished, an urban mirage.²⁶⁷

Once she has primed her readership with the introduction, Quindlen is careful to sustain attention with a variety of structural ploys. Her columns maintain an energy that is kept aloft with clever quips and insightful points. She makes use of what screenwriters would call “beats” – a minor character, concept, or object that is introduced and then reintroduced once or twice to create and sustain a rhythm and to complement the author’s primary message. In a column about consumerism, a Chatty Cathy doll serves as the subject of this type of “subplot”; in a piece about the recession, it is “jingle mail,” a phrase she defines early on and restates to add weight to her concluding sentence; and in her column about compulsory voting, Honey Nut Cheerios are the surprising object she selects to punctuate the piece.²⁶⁸ The column begins with, “We introduced the Australian exchange students to Honey Nut Cheerios. They introduced us to compulsory voting.” A third of the way into the article, having compared the high rate of voting in Australia to the much lower rate in America, Quindlen asks, “Why don’t we adopt the compulsory system the Aussies have embraced so successfully? And, on a lesser note, how come you can’t get Honey Nut Cheerios in Sydney?” In the last line of the piece,

²⁶⁶ Quindlen, “Mortal Kombat, Election Level”

²⁶⁷ Quindlen, “A New Kind of Poverty”

²⁶⁸ Anna Quindlen, “Why Stuff is Not Salvation.” *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 2008. Print.; Anna Quindlen, “Summertime Blues.” *Newsweek* 28 Jun. 2008. Print.

she makes a final reference in order to illustrate the fact that for all our talk about the superiority of America's democratic values, roughly half of us fail to practice what we preach: "Maybe our lackluster voting record means we're not really interested in all that anymore, that our new message to the world might be something simpler and more modern: we make a slamming sugared cereal!"²⁶⁹ These beats help hold the attention of the reader while also underscoring her ultimate point.

Quindlen is also adept at manipulating the placement of a column's climax for the reader by waiting to drop crucial information toward the end of the column before she "resolves" the story with her conclusion, plea, or thesis. In a column praising her friend and fellow journalist David Halberstam, Quindlen does not mention that he has passed away until two-thirds of the way through the column, allowing the reader to get to know the man without realizing they are essentially reading his obituary.²⁷⁰ Learning that he has recently died adds weight to the words they have just read without skewing how they initially read them. In a column about a teacher that has been suspended for inspiring her students with a controversial book, Quindlen holds back the teacher's best defense in order to amplify the climax of her argument: "Did I mention that she'd been teaching for 27 years, and that she paid for all those copies of the Grisham book herself?"²⁷¹

In some columns, she withholds her strongest point until the very end so that she can deliver it with a wallop in the final line. In these cases, there is no denouement, no wind-down; the last thing the reader experiences is a sharp mental jab. This particular structure does not fit the mold of the typical Climax pattern. Narratologists observe that women writers are more likely to stray from the normative model of narrative structure

²⁶⁹ Anna Quindlen, "Freedom's Just Another Word." *Newsweek* 18 Oct. 2004. Print.

²⁷⁰ Anna Quindlen, "Still the Brightest." *Newsweek* 14 May. 2007. Print.

²⁷¹ Anna Quindlen, "Book Leads to Teacher's Suspension." *Newsweek* 12 Jul. 2008. Print.

when telling stories.²⁷² Two examples of strong final lines come from a pair of columns she wrote on the topic of hunger several years apart. In the first, she hammers home the point that hunger is not a problem reserved for the citizens of third world countries: “Somewhere nearby there is a mother who covets a couple of boxes of spaghetti, and you could make her dream come true. That’s right. In America.”²⁷³ In the second, she emphasizes how unacceptable it is that so many of those Americans going hungry every day are children: “Recently at one shelter she saw a brace of high chairs, neatly stacked, waiting for their tiny occupants. That’s not food insecurity; that’s unconscionable.”²⁷⁴ The weight of these conclusive words surely are meant to stay with the audience long after they finish reading the column.

Evoking Emotion and Satisfying the Audience: Navigating a Narrative’s Structure

One might ask, if the “rules” of narrative structure are so clear cut, and storytellers merely follow them, where is the art in this? Where is the difficulty in storytelling? There is much more than simply possessing the technical knowledge necessary to craft a story. There is also the creativity required to both trigger emotions and resolve emotions in a way that entertains the audience and leaves them feeling satisfied at having gone on the emotional journey. It is one thing to induce the audience to feel certain emotions; it is another to achieve a “closed ending,” wherein one resolves those emotions, rendering both a feeling of satisfaction and a changed perspective or opinion.²⁷⁵ McKee writes: “With each line of dialogue or image of action you guide the

²⁷² Page, *Feminist Narratology*, 78

²⁷³ Anna Quindlen, “School’s Out for Summer.” *Newsweek* 18 Jun. 2001. Print.

²⁷⁴ Anna Quindlen, “Real Food for Thought.” *Newsweek* 11 Dec. 2006. Print.

²⁷⁵ R. McKee, 47

audience to anticipate certain possibilities, so that when events arrive, they somehow satisfy the expectations you've created."²⁷⁶

In a column, just as in a story, every sentence and every symbol is meaningful, and they all urge to be resolved. As a novelist, Quindlen understands that a book with a great ending will make the reader close the cover upon completion and hug it tight with a satisfied sigh. When asked to name her favorite books, Quindlen's list includes *Pride and Prejudice*, "because I'm thoroughly satisfied every time I finish."²⁷⁷ It seems that in many of her columns, she hopes to illicit a comparable response by first evoking emotions and then allaying them. For instance, in her column marking the first anniversary of 9/11, Quindlen writes about how the nation continues to process the tragedy a year later. She first raises the specter of the horrific things a nation witnessed and imagined – crashed airplanes, burning flesh, leaping from a skyscraper to one's death – prompting readers to be introspective and mindful about how the experience of 9/11 made them feel and asking them to recall those feelings whether or not they had been repressed over the past year: "Our own individual transformations made each of us wonder what our legacy would be if we left the world on a sunny September day with a 'to do' list floating down 80 stories to the street below." Next, she provides comfort to reduce the anguish those images induce and the guilt over having turned away from them in the year since the attacks:

We are people of two minds now, the one that looks forward and the one that unwillingly and unexpectedly flashes back... We are people who know that we never understood what "bad day" meant until that morning that cracked our world cleanly in two, that day that made two days, September 11 and 9-11. The

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 200

²⁷⁷ "Anna Quindlen: By the Book," *New York Times*, Sunday Book Review, April 18, 2013. Accessed November 9, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/books/review/anna-quindlen-by-the-book.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes&_r=1&

mundane and the monstrous... That is the way we have to live, or we cannot really go on living at all.²⁷⁸

As a columnist, Quindlen triggers reactions in her audience that enable them to get in touch with their emotions. This is a strategy she has discussed openly, has received criticism for, and has defended:

Do I rely very heavily on mine and the readers' emotions in many of my columns? Absolutely. Do I buy into the idea that the intellect always tells the truth and the emotions are somehow second-rate and suspect? I think that's a scam to devalue women's voices. Because historically we've tended to be in touch with the emotional tenor of our lives, somehow it turns out the emotions aren't really very valuable at all (and) what we really should be concentrating on is the intellect. No. I think we should strike a nice healthy balance between the two.²⁷⁹

Whether she strikes a balance or not is a matter of debate amongst critics, but her aim in utilizing emotion to convey her political message is clear. She hopes to accomplish what McKee describes as one of the most notable benefits of storytelling: "a story well told gives you the very thing you cannot get from life: meaningful emotional experience."²⁸⁰

This "meaningful emotional experience" must be presented in a way that is consistent with culturally typical narrative structure, because narrative structure is something with which audiences are intimately familiar, though they may not be able to articulate it in scholarly language if asked. As mentioned in the previous chapter in the section on schema theory, a knowledge of story structure is ingrained in humans from a very early age, but it is unlikely that they could describe a typical story as, for instance, one in which "the forces of antagonism provoked at the Inciting Incident will build to the limit of human experience, and that the telling cannot end until the protagonist is in some

²⁷⁸ Anna Quindlen, "One Day, Now Broken in Two." *Newsweek* 9 Sep. 2002. Print.

²⁷⁹ Steinbach

²⁸⁰ R. McKee, 111

sense face to face with these forces at their most powerful.”²⁸¹ However, the audience will, more likely than not, know when one or more of those elements is missing from a story or argument by virtue of the social reality that humans are exposed to storytelling from the time they are born into this world. Chatman calls this their “inferential capacity.”²⁸² Just as storytellers can disappoint if the assumptions of the audience are not met, so too can they disappoint if they do not trust that the typical audience member brings with them to the storytelling experience common knowledge and common sense, and instead they bore them with an overabundance of unnecessary exposition and detail.²⁸³ This matters because a disappointed audience is not one that is likely to be open to the columnist’s political message. If a columnist cannot be trusted to tell a story the *right* way, tying up all the loose ends and resolving all the questions, giving just the right amount of information instead of too much or too little, then why would any other message the storyteller communicates be trusted? Or, more pressingly, why would a reader stick with the story through to the end?

A final challenge for any storyteller lies in guiding the audience to a resolution while managing to also surprise them with how it is that they arrived there. For a columnist, this resolution is the conclusion they want their readership to reach. It was previously noted that the unexpected provides a source of energy to the story.²⁸⁴ William Goldman considers the unexpected to be critical, that a successful story ending must not only give the audience what it wants, but do so in a way that they do not expect.²⁸⁵ It is a tremendously difficult line for a storyteller to walk, to surprise the audience in a way they

²⁸¹ Ibid., 200

²⁸² Chatman, 29

²⁸³ R. McKee, 203

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 178-9

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 310

expect. “In Aristotle’s words,” writes McKee, “an ending must be both ‘inevitable and unexpected.’ Inevitable in the sense that as the Inciting Incident occurs, everything and anything seems possible, but at Climax, as the audience looks back through the telling, it should seem that the path the telling took was the *only* path.”²⁸⁶ As difficult as it is, achieving this challenging task is Quindlen’s strength. She understands that columnists face the risk of becoming predictable to their readers, so she works to counter that: “You want to surprise the reader a little bit.”²⁸⁷

The audience has expectations because the storyteller has prompted them, but what they truly hope for is the reversal of these expectations.²⁸⁸ Quindlen often provides this reversal in her columns by subverting conventional wisdom and highlighting hypocrisy when possible. In a column written toward the end of President Bill Clinton’s time in office, she challenges him to stay the execution of a man who deserves it for no other reason than her belief that the death penalty is morally wrong.²⁸⁹ She upends the reader’s assumptions about the criminal in question and the reasons he should be spared by purposely pointing out how the man on death row is *not* a storybook case. “You’ve heard those stories about the gentle, thoughtful man who is unjustly accused of a horrific crime, who molds on death row reading his Bible, who is finally freed with the help of DNA evidence, who emerges blinking into the sunlight of innocence as his family weeps and cheers. This isn’t one of them.” Her point is that President Clinton should play the moral hero anyway, because doing the right thing is not about how much the other person deserves it. Doing the right thing serves as its own justification – and reward.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 311

²⁸⁷ Quindlen, e-mail

²⁸⁸ R. McKee, 355

²⁸⁹ Anna Quindlen, “The End of the Janus Presidency.” *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 2000. Print.

Quindlen is skilled at turning conventional wisdom on its head. In another column about the death penalty, Quindlen subverts the assumption that conservatives have cornered the market on morality, highlighting what she considers to be the hypocrisy of their immoral stance on capital punishment.²⁹⁰ When making the typically liberal argument against the censorship of so-called art and literature, she does so in the unexpected manner of connecting such censorship to state paternalism, which is something that conservatives often shun.²⁹¹ In a column about transsexuals, instead of side-stepping the question of morality, she brings it to the forefront, arguing that the way people treat “immoral” behavior is really what’s immoral.²⁹² As a well-known journalist with many years’ worth of political columns publicly-available, her opinions are predictable; yet how she argues for them is often not.

Quindlen herself values highly the tactic of shining a light on areas where she sees hypocrisy in order to surprise an audience. She writes in a column about New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani:

The very best stories are about hypocrisy: the pious man of God who patronizes prostitutes, the leader of a right-wing college who is accused of sleeping with his daughter-in-law, the president who is a fond father and then talks dirty on the phone with a woman young enough to be his daughter. These are the moral equivalent of man bites dog.

She writes about the alleged hypocrisy of a number of groups, including conservative activist women, about whom she says, “One of the more ironic spectacles is listening as conservative women trash the women’s movement, the movement that made their lives as activist lawyers, lobbyists and pundits possible.”²⁹³ She writes about anti-abortion

²⁹⁰ Anna Quindlen, “The Call From the Governor.” *Newsweek* 19 Jun. 2000. Print.

²⁹¹ Quindlen, “Sound and Fury, Signifying Zip”

²⁹² Anna Quindlen, “Outside the Bright Lines.” *Newsweek* 10 Aug. 2003. Print.

²⁹³ Anna Quindlen, “We’re Missing Some Senators.” *Newsweek* 21 Mar. 2005. Print.

protestors who seek punishment for those who obtain abortions, arguing that such activists convey such certainty about their hardline stance, yet have no answer when asked how much jail time would be appropriate for a woman who has had an abortion: “The great thing about video is that you can see the mental wheels turning as these people realize that they somehow have overlooked something central while they were slinging certainties.”²⁹⁴ As another example, Quindlen describes what she claims are unfair standards to which we hold certain demographic populations in a country whose core principles are based on the notion of equality: “Like the naturalized citizens who are expected to know more about America than those of us born here, gay couples are being held to a standard the denizens of Vegas chapels and divorce courts have never had to meet: to justify the simple human urge, so taken for granted by the rest of us, to fully and legally come together.” She maintains that we are missing the point, and missing out on the benefits, of staying true to our core principles: “Just as it’s common to see an immigrant take the oath and then kiss the ground, the result of all this enforced soul-searching may well be a fervor that will honor an embattled institution.”²⁹⁵

In all the ways described above, Quindlen capitalizes on narrative structure to lead her readers on a journey that ends in resolution and, hopefully, agreement – agreement with her, agreement with liberal beliefs, and agreement that satisfaction has been provided. Quindlen’s goal is to achieve this resolution using such subtlety and surprise that many may not realize they have been led at all, wishing her audience to experience what McKee describes as “a rush of knowledge *as if they did it for*

²⁹⁴ Anna Quindlen, “How Much Jail Time for Women Who Have Abortions?” *Newsweek* 6 Aug. 2007. Print.

²⁹⁵ Anna Quindlen, “Desecration? Dedication!” *Newsweek* 23 Feb. 2004. Print.

themselves.”²⁹⁶ The potential benefit is if Quindlen’s readers are all the more confident about their new position because they feel as if they have arrived at it on their own.

Evoking Empathy and Making the Political Personal

As a writer, making the right creative choices in order to satisfy an audience and leave them feeling fulfilled requires a deep understanding of psychology and of humanity. Campbell contends that myths are a “spontaneous production of the psyche” that project our desires and fears.²⁹⁷ To encapsulate and tap into these feelings is a measure of the storyteller’s knowledge and understanding of society and human nature.²⁹⁸ This is something at which Quindlen is considered to excel. In her profile in the *Baltimore Sun*, Alice Steinbach explains that Quindlen’s “devoted readers” think of her as “a best friend who was writing not only about her life but theirs as well,” and that when she was writing her “Life in the 30s” column for the *New York Times* “it was not unusual for readers to tape her columns to refrigerators or clip and mail them to daughters, to friends, to sisters.”²⁹⁹

A significant part of storytelling is getting the audience to identify with and relate to the subject matter – to both demonstrate and inspire empathy. Empathy is a key factor in engaging the reader and getting him or her to identify with elements of the story, which can prompt buy-in and ultimately lead to successful persuasion. Quindlen is forthcoming in her belief that empathy is the journalist’s most important tool, and that it is the most vital element of storytelling. She is proud of the focus she places on empathy

²⁹⁶ R. McKee, 237

²⁹⁷ Campbell, 2

²⁹⁸ R. McKee, 19

²⁹⁹ Steinbach

in her work and describes an experience she had early on in her career interviewing the parents of missing child Etan Patz, whose disappearance in 1979 sparked the missing children's movement, that inspired her belief in the need for empathy in her industry.³⁰⁰ In this line from a column about the discredited *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair, she writes, "I have often thought about the effect the Patzes had on me as some reporters have brought disgrace upon the profession. And it has made me wonder whether good journalists always have that moment in their background, the moment that merges humanity and story in an indelible way." In the same column, titled "The Great Obligation," she continues, "All this makes you wonder if journalism schools should teach not just accuracy, but empathy. But the truth is, you really get that by covering stories, not studying them, by imagining yourself in the place of the people you interview."³⁰¹

In support of some of the relevant scholarship on empathy reviewed in the previous chapter, it is worth noting that Quindlen believes that it is because she is a woman that she is more suited to understand and employ this human element in her writing, and credits the increasing use of an empathetic approach to the fact that more women are entering the journalism profession. In one column she asks, "Why do newspaper and magazine stories more often include human beings along with statistics? Is it coincidence that all this has happened since women began to enter those professions as both active participants and informed consumers in ever greater numbers?"³⁰²

³⁰⁰ "Times Topics: Etan Patz," *The New York Times* (New York, NY) http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/p/etan_patz/index.html?8qa&scp=1spot&sq=etan+patz&st=nyt (Accessed 16 March 2012).

³⁰¹ Quindlen. "The Great Obligation." *Newsweek* 19 Apr. 2004. Print.

³⁰² Anna Quindlen, "The Reasonable Woman Standard." *Newsweek* 27 Mar. 2000. Print.

Providing the audience with an empathetic storyline – “human beings along with statistics” – offers readers the chance to put themselves into the story. The attraction of stories in many cases is the chance to experience a life or a journey other than one’s own. Quindlen herself seems to recognize this power and make use of it. She uses this tactic again and again, getting the reader to put her or himself into the story, examples of which will follow shortly. Once the audience has put themselves into the story, they will begin to wish success for the protagonist, just as they hope to be successful in their own lives.³⁰³ However, it is crucial that the story and the protagonist seem real – not in terms of fiction versus nonfiction, but in terms of the aspects of human nature that are represented by the story. The protagonist’s thoughts and feelings must seem authentic, which is why storytellers are required to have an intricate understanding of humanity; characters must seem human.³⁰⁴ It is this humanity that the audience recognizes and is enough, even if they share no other qualities with the protagonist, to make them think, “This person is like me, and if I were in his shoes, I would want the same thing.”³⁰⁵ And so the audience will stick with the story, suffering what the protagonist suffers, in order to reap the satisfying reward of resolution at the end.³⁰⁶

Quindlen understands the importance of putting a human face on an issue by telling the personal stories of individuals, and in fact discusses this tactic – which she calls “public personification” – in a column on stem cells.³⁰⁷ In a piece on transsexuals, she threads a story about the life of a transsexual author throughout.³⁰⁸ In one pro-choice

³⁰³ R. McKee, 186

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 387

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 141

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 308

³⁰⁷ Anna Quindlen, “A New Look, An Old Battle.” *Newsweek* 8 Apr. 2001. Print.

³⁰⁸ Quindlen, “Outside the Bright Lines”

column, she implores readers to identify with people who are victimized by violent anti-abortion zealots.³⁰⁹ In another, she attempts to cut through the rhetoric of the abortion debate by making it personal: “Maybe you know someone who watches the little stick turn blue and sits down on the toilet to think about a culture of life or the right to privacy. I don’t. Lots of women have decided to end a pregnancy wondering why the so-called debate seems to have no connection to what they’re thinking, feeling and doing.”³¹⁰ On the topic of RU-486, Quindlen attempts to make a political issue personal by describing specific circumstances in which RU-486 can be prescribed and taken, many of which fall far outside the realm of ending a pregnancy.³¹¹

Quindlen notes the power of making political issues personal, which is why she claims President George W. Bush wanted to avoid such a circumstance with the Iraq War and ultimately instituted anti-community policies in order to do so. She writes,

The president never wanted the war in Iraq to be personal. His people forbade photographs of coffins arriving home. They refused to keep track of how many Iraqis had been killed and wounded. When ‘Nightline’ devoted a show to the faces of soldiers who had died, one conservative broadcast outlet even pulled the program from its lineup. The president wanted this to be about policy, not about people.³¹²

And she demonstrates how the story of a person has been so much more effective than just a push for policy change could be with respect to LGBT issues: “The gay-rights movement has shown over the last two decades that a powerful enemy of such misinformation is personal testimony, that coming out as an individual can combat the big lies about the group.”³¹³

³⁰⁹ Quindlen, “The Terrorists Here At Home”

³¹⁰ Anna Quindlen, “Life Begins at Conversation.” *Newsweek* 28 Nov. 2004. Print.

³¹¹ Anna Quindlen, “RU-486 Keeps Abortion Private.” *Newsweek* 6 Feb. 2009. Print.

³¹² Anna Quindlen, “We’ve Been Here Before.” *Newsweek* 31 Oct. 2005. Print.

³¹³ Anna Quindlen, “The Clinic: A No-Spin Zone.” *Newsweek* 16 Oct. 2006. Print.

In certain circumstances, she openly asks the reader to put him or herself into the situation, as if to say “this could be you.” In a column on organ donation, her opening line is, “What if you had something that you didn’t need and giving it to another person would save his or her life?”³¹⁴ She implores her readers to see how a particular issue relates to them. In an effort to quash apathy, she challenges her readers: “Issues are hard. But they have a way of becoming the stuff of our daily lives, and woe to the citizen who ignores that.”³¹⁵ This is relevant, she insists, because political issues are “intimate issues” to which “no family is immune.”³¹⁶ In a call to raise the level of debate in campaigns, she writes, “If you have a gun, a womb, a wallet, a mortgage, an ailment or a kid, there are real choices proffered by serious men with competing agendas.”³¹⁷ And, as mentioned previously, she even makes the subject of reducing the backlog of DNA evidence pertinent to the reader’s everyday life:

Making this technology as available as possible is as much a personal policy issue as water and sewers or public schools. Just imagine that there is a serial rapist out there.... while the kits wait, and the man walks, he rapes you. Or your daughter. That’s a pretty personal issue, isn’t it? And it would have been so easy to stop him.³¹⁸

In addition, Quindlen uses the human element in another way: to take the shine off certain things, to make them accessible, more relatable – and also to show that everything is fallible. In a piece about America’s reluctance to talk about race, she portrays police officers as only human, with all the faults humans possess: “Police officers are just us wearing uniforms. The assumptions they make, the prejudices they carry with them, are the assumptions and prejudices of their roots, their neighborhoods,

³¹⁴ Anna Quindlen, “Becoming A Secret Santa.” *Newsweek* 16 Dec. 2002. Print.

³¹⁵ Anna Quindlen, “The Inalienable Right to Whine.” *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 1999. Print.

³¹⁶ Anna Quindlen, “Singing Praise to the Crazy.” *Newsweek* 29 Jan. 2001. Print.

³¹⁷ Quindlen, “The Inalienable Right to Whine”

³¹⁸ Anna Quindlen, “From Coffee Cup to Court.” *Newsweek* 29 Apr. 2002. Print.

their society.”³¹⁹ She takes a similar tack with media to show there is no such thing as media objectivity: “Reporters are citizens who just happen to carry notebooks.”³²⁰ Finally, she pierces through the conventional rhetoric surrounding the death penalty as “right” or “wrong” and makes the point that whenever humans are involved – and in this case they are involved as judges, juries, politicians, prison wardens, and executioners – there is bound to be human error, and that means innocent lives lost.³²¹ In this way, Quindlen makes these issues and these people seem ordinary, because it is ordinariness with which her readers identify. This identification is powerful because when a reader takes in Quindlen’s message and thinks, “This could be me” or “This could be about me,” the subject at hand immediately feels more important and more relevant, its message more urgent and to be taken more seriously.

The Use of a Hero

Beyond the ordinary and everyday, Quindlen understands that – while those are the things readers identify with – deep down they all want to be extraordinary. This is where the storyteller’s use of the “hero” can be powerful. According to Lule, every culture crystallizes its ideals and values into stories about a hero.³²² Heroes, he maintains, show the ordinary citizen that they too can be extraordinary: “Heroes remind people that they can succeed, that they can achieve greatness.”³²³ Quindlen’s framing of certain subjects as heroes offers inspiration to her readers. For instance, in a country where getting out of jury duty can seem like a competitive sport, she casts the juror as

³¹⁹ Anna Quindlen, “The Problem of the Color Line.” *Newsweek* 13 Mar. 2000. Print.

³²⁰ Anna Quindlen, “The Harsh Nurse and Her Lessons.” *Newsweek* 22 Oct. 2001. Print.

³²¹ Quindlen, “The Call From the Governor”

³²² Lule, 82

³²³ *Ibid.*, 23

hero, claiming that being a juror “still has the power to elevate an ordinary citizen.”³²⁴ In a column on the late *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham, she describes an extraordinary life of a savvy businesswoman that started with and continued to be grounded by quite ordinary circumstances.³²⁵ In the way Quindlen describes her, Graham was just another woman, it turns out, who juggled motherhood with an unlikely career and managed to exceed all expectations. It is extraordinary, yet it happens all the time. Interestingly, Lule and McKee agree that a humble beginning is a requirement of the hero figure, and is often the starting point for his quest. The story is more compelling because the odds are stacked against the hero if she is cast as an underdog.³²⁶

Heroes – whether real well-known people or fictional characters – are attractive to audiences and hold their attention.³²⁷ Duncombe contends that this helps explain society’s interest in celebrity culture.³²⁸ Advertisers capitalize on the hero trope as well. Because audience members relate to heroes on an individual level, the use of a hero allows advertisers to convince individual consumers to buy individual products.³²⁹ But while society’s attraction to a hero is sometimes used for these more shallow reasons, columnists can use the story of a hero as it has been used for thousands of years – to inform, instruct, and persuade. Like advertisers, columnists need to attract and hold the attention of an audience, and to communicate to members of their readership on an individual level.

³²⁴ Anna Quindlen, “Duty? Maybe It’s Really Self-Help.” *Newsweek* 7 May 2001. Print.

³²⁵ Anna Quindlen, “A Good Girl, A Great Woman.” *Newsweek* 30 Jul. 2001. Print.

³²⁶ Lule, 102; R. McKee, 318

³²⁷ Lule, 84; J. E. Kopfman, Smith, S. W., Ah Yun, J. K., & Hodges, A., 285. Kopfman et al. cite Shelley Taylor and Suzanne Thompson’s 1982 work suggesting that narrative strategies that incorporate a character to which the reader can closely relate will increase reader attention, and therefore increase the chance that persuasion will occur, as a greater interest in the message is likely to lead to systematic processing.

³²⁸ Duncombe, 107

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85

A Hero's Quest will necessarily involve struggles, obstacles, and trials – without these there is no story to tell.³³⁰ As described earlier in this chapter, the quest begins with the Separation, or Inciting Incident, which is the event that inspires the hero to embark on the quest that will push her to the limits.³³¹ The Inciting Incident gives the hero a goal, something physical, circumstantial, or internal that will put her or his life back in balance.³³² This goal is the change that is sought. In addition to this goal, the story requires that there be forces of antagonism that are keeping him from the goal.³³³ Once all these aspects are delineated, the audience will begin to identify with the hero and hope that the hero will be successful.³³⁴

Knowing that the audience will relate to the hero, the columnist is tasked with making sure the readers are rewarded alongside her. For the hero, the lessons of each quest are profound and life-altering. Campbell has written eloquently and prolifically on the lessons of the hero – describing them as the “message of the all-generating void” and the “wisdom brought forth from the deep.”³³⁵ McKee offers a simpler description of the hero's lessons: “First, the discovery of a world we do not know... Second, once inside this alien world, we find ourselves.”³³⁶ The ultimate test of these lessons – a requirement of the quest – is re-entry into the life or world in which the hero began.³³⁷ Once the hero has re-entered her home environment, using the lessons she has learned, she becomes a

³³⁰ Lule, 88; Campbell, 81

³³¹ R. McKee, 375

³³² *Ibid.*, 192

³³³ *Ibid.*, 258

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 347

³³⁵ Campbell, 188-9

³³⁶ R. McKee, 5-6

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 200

“master of two worlds.” As Campbell explains, “Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division...is the talent of the master.”³³⁸

Columnists, whether or not they are making use of a heroic protagonist in their piece, write from the perspective of a hero who has returned and can speak as a “master of two worlds.” The first world is the one the reader knows; the second is the columnist’s perspective. Just as the hero struggles with how to reenter the world knowing what she knows now, columnists contend with how to convey their perspective to their readership. Quindlen’s reliance on the narrative strategies outlined above, combined with her ability to engender the trust of her readership, are what enable her to take her audience on a journey to the “second world” of her political perspective.

Casualties of Quindlen’s Narrative Strategies

While one of Quindlen’s strengths is that she can clarify and simplify for her readers the current events and cultural issues that are mired in grey areas, critics of hers respond with the argument that not everything is black and white. They fault Quindlen for oversimplifying or minimizing complex topics and concerns. Some things – like foreign affairs or genocide or international epidemics, they contend – are not everyday problems or are not comparable to an American’s everyday problems. Critic Lee Siegel observes that, “In her hands, the immediate preoccupations of the American self subjugate and domesticate and assimilate every distant tragedy.”³³⁹ Marjorie Williams suggests that the same strategy of relying on personal anecdotes that works in Quindlen’s “Life in the 30’s” columns is out of place in her political writing: “She is no longer

³³⁸ Campbell, 188, 196

³³⁹ Siegel

content to take these truths at their human size. She [still] mines giant lessons in social policy with her miniaturist's tools."³⁴⁰

Several reviewers have raised the question of whether Quindlen's middle-class background and values – the same values that make her relatable to the large number of readers who see themselves in her – limit her worldview. Part of her handicap is that she has been forthright in her writing about her roots and her personal life throughout her career. While this is something that critics and readers agree sets her apart from the mostly white, mostly male columnists whose writings appear alongside hers, and is indeed seen as a refreshing difference from them, the result is that her opinions are more open to quick judgment, and more easily regarded as narrow because of it.³⁴¹ Some seem to comb for hints of racism and classism, in spite of the fact that many of her overtly spoken opinions are against such discrimination. A reviewer on Amazon.com with the handle "Lily Bart" writes that Quindlen "acknowledges with almost disturbing cheerfulness that she grew up in a neighborhood 'where a Jewish family would have been a rarity and a black family an impossibility.' The boys of Bensonhurst used murder to keep their neighborhood all white – what weapons did Anna's parents use? Does she know?" The reviewer is referring to Quindlen's 1990 *New York Times* op-ed column on the beating and murder of a 16-year-old black boy named Yusuf Hawkins by a mob of white teenagers in the Bensonhurst neighborhood of Brooklyn.³⁴² The reviewer continues:

On repeated readings, one gets the impression that what Anna Quindlen finds most repulsive about the boys of Bensonhurst is not that they were willing to

³⁴⁰ M. Williams, 172

³⁴¹ Ibid., 166

³⁴² Anna Quindlen, "Public & Private; A Changing World," *New York Times*, May 20, 1990. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/20/opinion/public-private-a-changing-world.html>.

stoop to murder but that they were defending a working-class neighborhood, not a middle class one... She has lived in all-white neighborhoods all her life, yet she almost unthinkingly scapegoats working class males, equating their class pride with racial hatred and racial violence. But the equation is not complete unless you factor in the fact that upper class whites take the right to live in “exclusive” neighborhoods for granted.

In a close reading of the op-ed, this scholar does not raise the same questions. Quindlen’s argument seems to be that while the world was changing around these young Italian-American men in the 1980s – the nation and its cities and its neighborhoods were becoming more diverse, gender roles were continuing to shift and blur, the economy was struggling and jobs were harder to come by – they were not changing with it. Instead, they were determined to hold on to the privilege that their skin color and their gender had afforded their forefathers, and they would beat and murder an outsider if that is what it took to do so. The reviewer also questions what she sees as the “contradiction” between Quindlen’s upbringing and the “multi-racial future she wants for other people’s children.” But it is unfair to punish Quindlen for choices her parents made in raising her, and worth noting that Quindlen raised her own children in New York City and Hoboken, New Jersey, cities that are incredibly diverse.

The same reviewer echoes a complaint that Williams also issues, which is that Quindlen’s real life human examples skew stereotypical and are seen as convenient for her arguments. One of the examples the reviewer offers is more damning in terms of the question of whether Quindlen’s writing is classist at times. “It’s regrettable,” Bart states, “that...she refers to Gulf War soldiers (like myself) as ‘not smart, not rich, not directed enough for college.’ This is exactly the kind of...comment that can be twisted by a cunning conservative commentator...to suggest that liberals are smug elitists who hold

all working class people in contempt.”³⁴³ On what Williams sees as Quindlen’s penchant for utilizing stereotypical examples, she claims, “All her welfare recipients are beatific moms stymied only by the difficulty of finding affordable child care; her abortion seekers are almost invariably thoughtful, rueful victims of forces beyond their control.”³⁴⁴ Bart sees this stereotypical framing of Quindlen’s examples of African-Americans as “condescending and paternalistic” and proof that “she is the product of racial privilege.”³⁴⁵

One reviewer on Amazon.com, who signs off as simply “A Customer,” is offended by the tone they believe Quindlen’s privileged position in society lends to her writing: “I find Ms. Quindlen too smug to digest well. Her writing is often inane. She is [not] speaking for the majority of women of her generation, just a small privileged subset.”³⁴⁶ Another reviewer takes a different view, believing that Quindlen’s focus on everyday life allows her to elucidate some of the experiences that cross lines of class and race: “Perhaps she is living a more ‘affluent’ life than many (most?) of her readers, but she doesn’t dwell or rub our faces in it. Instead, she takes parenting, personality, work, marriage, and society at large and melds her experiences into the experiences of us all.”³⁴⁷ The *New York Times* itself, reviewing her latest novel, describes her political writings as representing “a generous and moving interrogation of women’s experience across the lines of class and race.”³⁴⁸ While clearly there is difference of opinion on this

³⁴³ Anna Quindlen, “Public & Private; Summer’s Soldier,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1990. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/13/opinion/public-private-summer-s-soldiers.html>.

³⁴⁴ M. Williams, 174

³⁴⁵ Lily Bart

³⁴⁶ A Customer

³⁴⁷ Life Out Loud

³⁴⁸ Joanna Rakoff, “Second Shot,” review of *Still Life With Bread Crumbs*, by Anna Quindlen, *New York Times*, February 6, 2014, Sunday Book Review, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/books/review/anna-quindlens-still-life-with-bread-crumbs.html?_r=1.

matter, again, it is worth asking: Are Quindlen's male columnists evaluated in this manner? Are they faulted for their privilege or for their tone? Or does possessing a privilege and tone similar to Quindlen only serve to make them come across as more authoritative and deserving of their soapbox?

“Issues are things that happen to people in sufficient numbers to elicit widespread attention; in other words, they’re just life happening.”
Anna Quindlen³⁴⁹

An American Studies Perspective on Quindlen's Strategies and Successes

One of the priorities of American Studies as a discipline is the concept of materiality, meaning the tangible realities, experiences, and objects humans encounter throughout their everyday lives. American Studies students are taught that theorizing is at its best when it is grounded with the material. Clifford Geertz writes that “the danger that cultural analysis...will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life...is an ever-present one. The only defense against it is to train such analysis on such realities and such necessities in the first place.”³⁵⁰ Many of the scholarly works we read as American Studies students call for and incorporate materiality, affirming the application of experience within scholarship.³⁵¹

At several points throughout this analysis of Anna Quindlen's style and political writings, her use of the everyday within her work has been on display.³⁵² Placing a focus

³⁴⁹ GoodReads.com

³⁵⁰ Geertz, 30

³⁵¹ Glassie, 26; parts of the preceding section are based on an excerpt from Glacel, “American Studies History & Theory Comprehensive Exam”

³⁵² Several reviews of her novels have praised Quindlen's use of and reliance on everyday life as well. “[The protagonist's] photographs are celebrated for turning the ‘minutiae of women's lives into unforgettable images,’ and Quindlen does the same here with her enveloping, sure-handed storytelling,” in Andrea Walker, “Picks and Pans: Books,” review of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*, by Anna Quindlen,

on the stuff of humans' lives, she transforms the personal into the political and vice versa, elevating the individual and the individual's experience. In Quindlen's case, her emphasis on and skill with handling the material of everyday life allows her to have a material effect on the individual lives of her readers as well. Review after review as referenced in these two chapters show that readers experience real feelings and heightened clarity upon reading Quindlen's columns – in other words, her work has a describable and at times material effect on them. This is one of the benefits of relying on materiality to convey a message. It helps ensure that high-concept writing remains accessible and applicable to the everyday reader. An inclusion of the material – either to contextualize the message, test the message, or demonstrate how the message can be applied to one's life – only serves to make the message stronger.³⁵³

Quindlen uses the material in tandem with a reliance on her identity to situate her political opinions. Williams wrote that Quindlen's column "Life in the 30s" was "highly personal and pointillistic, and was consciously conceived as the work of a female voice; often praised as a refreshing contrast to the *Times*' all-male stable of opinion-mongers, it embodies what Quindlen once called 'a world view largely shaped by gender.'"³⁵⁴ But another way of saying that is a world view largely shaped by *identity*, and Quindlen's is. Her openness with the point-of-view she takes and the unabashed manner in which she relies on it is in keeping with the priorities of American Studies, which takes seriously the

People, February 10, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2015.; "Quindlen has made a home at the top of the bestsellers lists with novels that capture the grace and frailty of everyday life..." from the Library Journal review of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*; "Quindlen has always excelled at capturing telling details in a story, and she does so again in this quiet, powerful novel, showing the charged emotions that teem beneath the surface of daily life," from the Publishers Weekly review of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*. These reviews and others can be found at "Still Life with Bread Crumbs," The Random House Group, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/editions/still-life-with-breadcrumbs/9780091954116>.

³⁵³ Jameson, 4

³⁵⁴ M. Williams, 166

concepts of identity and difference and also encourages a reflexive stance in seeking to be self-aware of the effect one's identity has on one's worldview.

The American Studies approach with regard to materiality and difference is what has allowed scholars to move beyond the normativity of the predominantly white, middle-class, straight, and male-centric focus of many traditional disciplines, and it is what sets Quindlen apart from the traditionally male-centric political columns of her peers. Her use of the "minutiae of women's lives" enables her to challenge some oversimplified and, at times, degrading narratives about political issues ranging from abortion to gun violence to the death penalty to racism.³⁵⁵ In this way, Quindlen follows in the footsteps of female public intellectuals who used their experiences and situated identities to formulate cultural analysis. Sojourner Truth, in her proclamation "Ain't I a Woman?," uses the contradictions of her own experiences to expose the concept of woman as being culturally constructed.³⁵⁶ Gloria Anzaldua would use the same strategy over one hundred years later, relying on the materiality of her own life as the basis for *Borderlands La Frontera*.³⁵⁷ In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins validates this tactic, claiming that black women intellectuals best contribute to a black women's group standpoint when they rely on their experiences as situated knowers.³⁵⁸

The benefits of this approach abound; as Smith has written, this tactic also results in making a situated experience more visible to those who do not live it, and using the real voices of women positively impacts both intellectual work and the women whose

³⁵⁵ Andrea Walker, "Picks and Pans: Books," review of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*, by Anna Quindlen, *People*, February 10, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2015.

<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20782739,00.html>.

³⁵⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2nd ed., 2000), 14

³⁵⁷ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987; San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 3rd edition, 2007).

³⁵⁸ Collins, 19

consciousnesses are raised by reflecting upon the experiences they have to share.³⁵⁹

Finally, materiality and the inclusion of experience can reintegrate the body, offering a corrective for so many of the political discussions in the media on topics such as abortion, end-of-life choices, and stem cell research that leave out physical and bodily considerations. In this arena, Quindlen excels.

Quindlen's approach does not sit well with Williams, who sees her style of political writing as too placating and pleasing. In her profile of Quindlen, at the point where Williams asserts that with her then-position as op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* Quindlen is in a position to "say anything she pleases," Williams asks, "Why, then, is her voice still so often pitched to tell others what they want to hear?"³⁶⁰ Commenting on Williams' profile, Hallie Levine observes that Quindlen's writing "is strangely reminiscent of the nineteenth century branch of feminism that preached a woman's role to be that of a social reformer, urging readers to wake up to such issues as the plight of children in the inner cities," adding, "There is, of course, nothing wrong with using a column as a vehicle for social change."³⁶¹

Nothing wrong? Or nothing better? In the well-tread debate over equality feminism and difference feminism, the argument could be made that Quindlen's writing reinforces the stereotype that women communicate differently and that different issue areas concern them. Or it could be argued that Quindlen is bringing a focus to topics that historically have not been given the attention and column inches that they deserve. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas writes about 19th century writer and

³⁵⁹ Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 168; Collins, 3, 24

³⁶⁰ M. Williams, 167

³⁶¹ H. Levine

abolitionist Harriet Farley, who posits, “To convince people, we must gain access to them.” Douglas refers to this as “sugarcoat[ing] the proverbial pill.”³⁶² So why, to repeat Williams’ question, might Quindlen write in a way that tells her audience what they want to hear? Perhaps because that is the best way to get an audience to listen, and also because that is how, if one is good at it, one gets an audience to change their minds.

“We get to grow and evolve with her as she points out the obvious, makes clear the hazier issues, and always, with refreshing honesty, makes us feel as if we know her as well as we know our next door neighbor. While many won’t agree with her politics, I believe Quindlen puts into words the things we all feel in our hearts, minds, bodies and souls.”

Michele Cozzens,
Amazon.com Reviewer³⁶³

Conclusion

It seems telling that when readers talk about what it is like to read Anna Quindlen’s political columns, their impressions are of her column in its recurring totality because each in its singularity offers them the same experience: clarity, emotional resonance, and a new way of looking at things. This speaks to the strength of her style and the skills that have been highlighted above: her understanding and use of narrative structure, her ability to evoke and resolve the emotions of her audience in order to leave them with a feeling of satisfaction, and her aptitude for triggering empathy in her readers and making the personal political. And it speaks to her skill in capitalizing on her style in such a way that she engenders the trust of her readers and targets their values through her writing.

³⁶² Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1977), 79

³⁶³ Cozzens

Does Quindlen’s penchant for storytelling improve the capacity of her political columns to resonate with her audience? This analysis seems to show that it does, which supports this dissertation’s contention that it is the audience’s cultural relationship with storytelling that enables those who capitalize on it to establish a greater connection across political divides and perhaps achieve a greater influence on one’s readership. As explored in the introductory chapter, stories play an array of roles for humans. Stories grab attention, stories shape values, and stories frame interpretations and perspectives. Through the tension and climax of the narrative, stories heighten interest – in Quindlen’s case, interest in current events.³⁶⁴ As writer Neil Gaiman explains, stories provide the audience with “the drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it’s hard, because someone’s in trouble and you have to know how it’s all going to end.”³⁶⁵ Gaiman also discusses the role of empathy in culture and what stories have to do with it, in a way that elucidates further the importance of Quindlen’s use of it in her political writing. Stories, he argues, build empathy, and “empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals.”³⁶⁶ In other words, empathy renders the audience a group of people with an expanded mindset and the capacity for concerns other than their immediate selves – political and cultural concerns.

In a review of her novel *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*, the *New York Times* writes that while it is “Quindlen’s least overtly political novel, it packs perhaps the most serious

³⁶⁴ Scott L. Althaus, “Free Falls, High Dives, and the Future of Democratic Accountability,” *The Politics of News/The News of Politics*, Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, & Pippa Norris, eds., (Washington: CQ Press, 2nd ed., 2007), 161

³⁶⁵ Neil Gaiman, “Why Our Future Depends On Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming,” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2013. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming>.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

punch.”³⁶⁷ Quindlen’s writing demonstrates that stories can be just as strong a communication as an argument, as a directive, as an overt statement, or as any political screed. Stories leave readers with an effect much longer lasting than those other types of communications as well. In an interview with this scholar, as noted earlier, Quindlen voices a pride in her earnestness and authenticity as a columnist. “That is what I brought to the enterprise. Never been a foreign correspondent. Only briefly an editor. No investigative work. All I had going for me was this determination to try to figure out the human condition.”³⁶⁸ As a result of this determination, Quindlen brings a humanity and a deep understanding of culture that allow her to write in a way that makes it seem like she is telling readers what they want to hear. She engages them, entertains them, and moves them, tapping into their most closely-held cultural values, all the while communicating sophisticated political opinions that make her readers feel as if those were their opinions all along.

³⁶⁷ Walker

³⁶⁸ Quindlen, e-mail

“Sorkin’s writing still makes me believe.”
Tad Bartimus in *Emmy Magazine*³⁶⁹

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Most Upscale Program on Television”

When *The West Wing* first debuted, in 1999, it was assumed the show would tank in the ratings. Many of the entertainment executives involved in the project, to include the show’s creator, considered the project to be doomed from the start.³⁷⁰ The subject matter – a fictional U.S. president and his senior staff attempting to govern a nation and implement policies – had the potential to be divisive or, even worse, boring. The teleplays committed the cardinal sin of being “too smart,” an attribute which was assumed to alienate an American audience.³⁷¹ Romantic relationships, at most only alluded to, were an afterthought on the show. *The West Wing* had all the wrong qualities and portrayed oft-maligned politicians as having all the right ones. Yet it did not tank. Instead *The West Wing* went on to survive for seven seasons, garnering twenty million weekly viewers at its peak, viewers who liked that the show was “challenging” and made them think.³⁷² The series won three Emmy Awards and was considered to be one of the best shows of its time when it aired, helping to usher in the Golden Age of Television.³⁷³

³⁶⁹ Tad Bartimus, “Remote Patrol,” *emmy Magazine*, June 2001.

³⁷⁰ Neal Justin, “‘The West Wing’ Turned Dark Horse into a Champion,” *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune*, April 21, 2006.

³⁷¹ Tim Goodman, “Disloyalty Oaths,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 30, 2002. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Disloyalty-oaths-Viewers-are-gripping-about-two-2777392.php>.

³⁷² Crawley, 62; Ryan, October 22, 2001 (10:54 pm), Christine, October 23, 2001 (7:29 am), Kathleen, October 23, 2001 (6:43 pm), comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, October 22, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/topics/10089>.

³⁷³ Saraiya

How did a television show focusing on the sausage-making machinations of a liberal White House manage to stay on the air for so long? It did so by earning a large and loyal viewership of fans from across the political spectrum in spite of its perceived political slant. What became clear as the seasons progressed, and what is of interest to this scholar, is that *The West Wing*'s first-rate storytelling enabled its political subject matter to be enjoyable, satisfying, and even at times influential to a politically-diverse audience. This chapter will consider how Aaron Sorkin, creator and writer of *The West Wing*, capitalizes on his viewers' cultural relationship with storytelling in order to achieve this.

Sorkin depends on a number of strategies in these endeavors, including the heavy use of the narrative structure known as the hero's quest, the linking of characters and political issues to targeted cultural values that transcend national party politics, and the creation of straw-men in the form of common "enemies" – for example foreign governments and the increasingly unpopular U.S. Congress – against which the audience can unite alongside the characters.³⁷⁴ In rooting for the protagonists on the President's staff – which the viewer is compelled to do based on the characters' embodiment of certain cultural values, their portrayal as heroes who are on a perpetual quest for justice, and as public servants who continually eschew politics in favor of policies – the viewer finds him or herself also rooting for the staffers' aims, which often include traditionally liberal political issues such as strengthening gun control, regulating the banking industry, and doing away with mandatory minimums.³⁷⁵ This chapter and the one that follows will

³⁷⁴ Parry-Giles & Parry Giles, 23-24, 46

³⁷⁵ Parry-Giles & Parry Giles, 32; "Five Votes Down"; "Enemies"; "Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Don Scardino. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

discuss how his strategies operate and why they tend to be successful, focusing only on the show's first season, which aired from September 1999 through May 2000. The case study will also rely on years' worth of posts from Internet message boards created in order for viewers to discuss their reactions to *The West Wing*.

First, though, an overview will be presented on the show itself, exploring how *The West Wing* really was the vision of one sole creator and writer, Aaron Sorkin; the distinct feel and style he lent to the drama; and a review of the competing perspectives of the show's political slant. Then it will explore *The West Wing*'s relationship with reality: how as a fictional drama it was removed from reality yet at times was seen as more representative of reality than the news; how its hopeful storylines served as an escape from contemporary political realities yet also managed to influence those contemporary political realities with its didactic qualities.

Next, this chapter will consider *The West Wing* as an influential storytelling platform and will discuss what storytelling as a medium has the power to accomplish; the reception of the show across the ideological spectrum; and some of the scholarship behind what this chapter is claiming. As promised, there will be a review of the specific narrative strategies outlined above, including how Sorkin put them to use in the first season of *The West Wing* in order to win over his audience. Importantly, subsequent to detailing Sorkin's storytelling strategies and their effects, the following chapter conclude by contemplating – in true *West Wing* style – questions of “means versus ends” in terms of what is gained and what is lost when storytelling is used as a method to influence an audience.

“I’m not your girlfriend, I’m not your camp counselor, and I’m not your sixth grade teacher you had a crush on. I’m a graduate of Harvard and Yale and I believe that my powers of debate can rise to meet the Socratic wonder that is the White House Press Corps.”

Josh Lyman, “Celestial Navigation”

About *The West Wing*

In 2003, when NBC Entertainment President Jeff Zucker was promoting *The West Wing* to potential media buyers, he touted the show as “the most upscale program on television.”³⁷⁶ Indeed, *The West Wing* was generally considered to be “quality” television, an industry term that refers to a show with greater production values, a demonstrated concern with current social topics, and an audience with high median income and education levels.³⁷⁷ *The West Wing* also stood out from the pack as a result of Aaron Sorkin’s personal style of writing, which includes a number of recognizable trademarks, some of which are so well-known that they continue to spark their own Internet memes years after the show concluded.³⁷⁸

For instance, Sorkin’s writing is known for its quick pace and his characters are known for their verbosity. For Sorkin, the sound and rhythm of his writing is as important to him as the content and meaning of it.³⁷⁹ Exchanges between characters can exhibit either staccato or lyrical qualities, or slip between the two styles.³⁸⁰ Snippets of

³⁷⁶ Brian Lowry, “Just How Airworthy Will a No-Sorkin ‘West Wing’ Be?,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2003. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/may/21/entertainment/et-lowry21>.

³⁷⁷ Crawley, 63, 68

³⁷⁸ Anna Silman, “The Art of the Aaron Sorkin Parody: A Brief History of Our Obsession with Spoofing Hollywood’s Most Spoof-able Writer,” *Salon.com*, accessed November 14, 2014. http://www.salon.com/2014/11/14/a_walk_and_talk_down_memory_lane_the_art_of_the_sorkin_parody/?source=newsletter.; James Fallows, “*The West Wing* on the Music of Oratory,” *The Atlantic*, January 4, 2015. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/01/west-wing-on-the-music-of-oratory/384197/>.

³⁷⁹ Richard Schiff, Interview with NBCi Online Chat, January 18, 2001, as quoted on WestWingEpGuide.com, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.westwingepguide.com/S1/Episodes/1_PILOT.html.

³⁸⁰ Crawley, 76

phrases may be repeated as much for how the repetition sounds coming out of the actors' mouths as for emphasis, and monologues are made more poignant by their cadence and flow. In addition, the tempo of the words is often matched by movement of the actors' bodies; Sorkin is known for his use of the "walk-and-talk," wherein two characters have an exchange as they rush from one place to another together.³⁸¹ Just as importantly, however, are the hallmarks of Sorkin's subject matter. Sorkin's characters are imbued with an unmistakable sense of duty and belief in what is "right." So much so that critics have faulted Sorkin's writing at times for being overly preachy. But it is this very characteristic that helps enable his writing to win over viewers and turn so many of them into ardent fans, and therefore, it is this characteristic that will be unpacked further.³⁸²

In order to better understand the show as it was received by viewers during its span, it is helpful to put it into context of the political events as they occurred when the show was on air. While *The West Wing* itself was fiction, both its writers and its producers were concerned with how to situate it and promote it given the political climate in America in 1999.³⁸³ There is evidence of such an awareness in several instances. First, *The West Wing* was originally meant to debut in the fall of 1998, but NBC decided to hold off due to the distaste many Americans had for the White House in the wake of revelations that then-President Bill Clinton had had an affair with a White House intern. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted Executive Producer John Wells' explanation of the delay: "There was some justifiable concern over the political climate and whether this show would pass 'the snicker test.' Would anybody be able to take a show about the

³⁸¹ Saraiya

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 28

president and his senior staff seriously, given what was going on with the actual president and his senior staff? NBC asked us to wait.”³⁸⁴

Considering the righteousness with which Sorkin writes his characters, it may have been a good business decision. But perhaps it would have done as well even if it had debuted a year earlier amidst the tumultuous months of the Clinton sex scandal. One critic, Sonia Saraiya, writing for pop culture review website AVClub.com, contends that the first few seasons of *The West Wing*, in which the President, his staff, and public servants in general are portrayed as virtuous everyday heroes, were “written in direct and defiant response to the demoralizing liberal administration of the late ‘90s,” and that Democratic President Josiah Bartlet specifically represented “in some ways the anti-Clinton.”³⁸⁵ But the cynicism of the late-90s would be nothing compared to the dark days the United States would enter into following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which occurred just two years after *The West Wing*’s debut. The show’s primary director, Thomas Schlamme, believes the show would also not have done as well in a post-September 11 America. Discussing *The West Wing*’s pilot episode in 2003 four years after it aired, in which one of the subplots culminates with President Bartlet declaring that America should welcome immigrants who seek a better life within its borders, Schlamme said, “That [type of storyline is] not going to play right now.”³⁸⁶

The disconnect between Sorkin’s “rose-colored” vision of government workers and the simultaneous adoption of increasingly conservative governmental policies in the aftermath of September 11 was ultimately what received the blame for the 20 percent

³⁸⁴ Gail Shister, “NBC’s ‘West Wing’ runs political gamut, holds the scandal,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 2, 1999.

³⁸⁵ Saraiya

³⁸⁶ Liane Faulder, “Ironically, Bartlet’s re-election did *The West Wing*’s ratings no favours,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 26, 2003.

decrease in ratings *The West Wing* experienced in its fourth season.³⁸⁷ Nevertheless, *The West Wing* stands apart as a positive view of government rarely seen on television and certainly not emulated since. There are currently several television shows on the air that deal with America's national government, such as *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, *Alpha House*, and *Veep*, but none of them conveys the nation's leaders and public servants in a particularly positive light.³⁸⁸ Many of the characters in these shows disappoint the viewers, very few of them would viewers want to befriend, and rarely do any of the characters act heroically – unlike those of *The West Wing*.

“When I sleep, I dream about a great discussion with experts and ideas and diction and energy and honesty. And when I wake up, I think, I can sell that.”
President Bartlet, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”

Sorkin as *The West Wing*'s Storytelling Mastermind

One of the main arguments of this chapter is that *The West Wing*'s first-rate storytelling enabled its political subject matter to be enjoyable, satisfying, and even at times influential to a politically-diverse audience. As part of this argument, Sorkin is credited as not only *The West Wing*'s primary storyteller, but in the case of many of the first season's episodes, the sole storyteller of the show. It is important to be clear about this claim and verify it because it will be Sorkin's skills and strategies that are analyzed and Sorkin himself who is under consideration as a public storytelling figure. Television shows often have a number of writers on staff, as did *The West Wing*, but the evidence available demonstrates that Sorkin was the principal and sometimes only writer of each

³⁸⁷ Saraiya; Chuck Barney, “‘West Wing’ unlikely to soar as before,” *San Jose Mercury News*, October 15, 2003.

³⁸⁸ Jason Lynch, “Where Did All the Inspiring TV Politicians Go?,” AVClub.com, accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.avclub.com/article/where-did-all-the-inspiring-tv-politicians-go-200756>.

episode under examination. During the first season, the *Washington Post* reported that he was known for not relying on his staff of writers, even when facing shooting deadlines.³⁸⁹ Show credits seem to confirm this claim. Of the 22 episodes in the first season, Sorkin solely wrote 20 of the teleplays and co-wrote another. Of the 22 episodes, there were nine episodes for which he not only wrote the teleplays, but also shared no story concept credits with any other members of the writing staff.³⁹⁰

In addition to the fact that a majority of the episodes in season one are Sorkin's stories, interviews given by actors on *The West Wing* convey that Sorkin's style is to not allow the actors to deviate from his scripts at all. In an interview with NBC Interactive, Richard Schiff, who plays White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler, was asked how he felt about not being able to ad-lib during his scenes. Schiff responded, "During the pilot, we got into arguments about being such a stickler for every syllable." Later, Schiff began to understand Sorkin's approach and learned to work within it.³⁹¹ Given these facts, one can assume that the story as performed is the story as written by Aaron Sorkin. The preceding points have been made to establish that as this chapter discusses *The West Wing* as a story, it is both plausible and provable to consider Aaron Sorkin as its prime and often sole storyteller.

³⁸⁹ Sharon Waxman, "Art Meets Politics," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2000.

³⁹⁰ *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

³⁹¹ Schiff, NBCi Online Chat

“That government, no matter what its failures in the past and in times to come for that matter, government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind.”

Toby, “He Shall, From Time to Time”

Sorkin’s Style and Vision

Through his creation, Sorkin shared an unapologetically hopeful and optimistic vision of the federal government; one in which government workers are hard-working men and women with good intentions, public servants and elected officials can rise above politics, and government can come to the aid of everyday Americans in a positive way.³⁹²

Scholars John O’Connor and Peter Rollins, who edited a volume of writings about the show, described the series as “America’s best image of itself.”³⁹³ NiCole Robinson, who played Margaret, the assistant to White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry, told *TV Guide* that to her, *The West Wing* “depicted politics and government without the usual cynicism.”³⁹⁴ As one critics conveys, *The West Wing* is the type of show wherein one can “watch an episode over and over and get a new, important message of hope each time.”³⁹⁵

Sorkin himself described the idea of the show as a “valentine to public service,” with Executive Producer John Wells stating that at its foundation, *The West Wing* is about good government, “without being Pollyannaish about the sausage making that is politics.”³⁹⁶ For Sorkin, the show’s five main characters – Leo McGarry, Josh Lyman,

³⁹² Saraiya

³⁹³ Peter Rollins and John O’Connor, “Introduction,” *The West Wing’: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, Peter Rollins and John O’Connor, eds. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 13

³⁹⁴ Jonathan McDaid, “West Wing Extra: Interview with NiCole Robinson,” *TV Guide*, June 11, 2006.

³⁹⁵ “Good Lessons From the Tube,” *Lompoc Record*, May 17, 2006. Accessed November 10, 2015.

http://www.lompocrecord.com/news/opinion/editorial/good-lessons-from-the-tube/article_69935c5d-6c6e-5e5e-b3c7-a8083979e64a.html.

³⁹⁶ Gail Pennington, “Big changes await occupants of the “West Wing” White House,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 17, 2004.

C.J. Cregg, Toby Ziegler, and Sam Seaborn – are the ideal public servants.³⁹⁷ Using these characters, Sorkin created what Schiff describes as a “very romantic world,” a world in which hope and optimism thrive.³⁹⁸ And so, when watching *The West Wing*, the feelings viewers are able to take away are hopeful, optimistic feelings. For example, posting on a Yahoo! message board for fans of Aaron Sorkin, a user named Jesse praises Sorkin’s “ability to uplift me and to help me beleive [sic] that things can be better, that people can care and that public servants can be exactly that, public servants.”³⁹⁹ On the same thread, on the topic of what members of the group love most about Sorkin’s work, Jenny responds with “the undeniable optimism,” and Rhonda states that it is his ability to deliver “the hope that people can be better than you expect.”⁴⁰⁰

This experience of watching *The West Wing* is of primary importance to the observations and arguments made within this chapter and the next, and the Internet message board posts made by fans of the show will aid in the discovery of what that experience is like for viewers like them. The emotions felt by the audience as they follow the storyline have an impact on the reception of the messages communicated within the story. The material experience of relaxing at home on the couch or easy chair while a television show unfolds before the viewer, the feeling of satisfaction at the end of the episode when the plots and subplots are concluded and the heroes are met with fates that the viewer feels they deserve – these aspects of the audience experience factor into the success a storyteller has in communicating to or influencing their audience. That is

³⁹⁷ Aaron Sorkin, Interview by Terence Smith

³⁹⁸ Hal Boedeker, “Policy Shift On ‘West Wing’,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 16, 2004. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2004-01-16/news/0401150457_1_sorkin-west-wing-martin-sheen.

³⁹⁹ Jesse W. Jackson, October 23, 2001 (5:19 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

⁴⁰⁰ Jenny, October 23, 2001 (2:35 am), Rhonda, October 23, 2001 (12:24 am), comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

why it is crucial to note the overall tone and tendencies of the show that – in this case – reflect hope and optimism.

Another impression *The West Wing* makes on the audience is that of its elevated intellect. Critics agree that it is one of the more intelligent prime time television shows America has produced.⁴⁰¹ The characters speak fast, discussing obscure policy positions and rattling off unfamiliar governmental agency acronyms. Over and over on the Yahoo! message board dedicated to fans of Aaron Sorkin, users cite the pace, rhythm, and intelligence of the dialogue as aspects of the show they appreciate.⁴⁰² This is typically not the type of television fodder that attracts the average American. As Tim Goodman, a critic writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle* explains, “When viewers want smarts, they go to PBS. On network television, they demand first to be entertained.” With *The West Wing*, Sorkin was often able to accomplish both simultaneously – provide entertainment and provide intelligent subject matter – proving that the two need not be mutually exclusive.

At times, however, critics found this and other Sorkin trademarks tiresome. His optimism was questioned as unrealistic; his characters’ righteousness and verbosity as preachy. Goodman continues his critique of Sorkin’s style by maintaining that “going Ivy League only annoys people. Sorkin is at his worst when he takes his characters – already cut considerable critical slack for all talking the same way – and puts them on soap boxes.”⁴⁰³ Still, criticisms acknowledged, many television writers and audience members alike agree that, as television critic Chuck Barney writes, “Sorkin, when at the

⁴⁰¹ “Good Lessons From the Tube”; Goodman

⁴⁰² Ryan, 22 Oct 2001, Melissa, October 22, 2001 (8:20 pm), Jessica, October 22, 2001 (8:22 pm), Rhonda, 23 Oct 2001, Karen, October 23, 2001 (7:34 pm), Kathleen, 23 Oct 2001, Jessica, October 24, 2001 (2:59 pm), comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

⁴⁰³ Barney; Goodman

top of his game, had the vision and talent to make a good show great. The very best *West Wing* episodes always contained his golden touch – clever and witty rapid-fire banter, sharp, cliché-free insights into the human condition, and the ability to convey heartfelt drama in seemingly mundane political machinations.”⁴⁰⁴

“We’re not gonna be threatened by issues, we’re gonna put ‘em front and center.”
Leo McGarry, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”

The West Wing’s Political Slant

In terms of the show’s political slant, there is no doubt that the prevailing generalization about *The West Wing* is that it is a liberal-leaning show in terms of both topics and message.⁴⁰⁵ But a closer look challenges that assumption and reveals that there are several competing perspectives about the show’s ideology. This section will examine the differing opinions on *The West Wing’s* political slant by reviewing what has been said on the topic by the show’s creators, staff members and actors, viewers, and critics in the media. Such an exercise is important as its findings may aid in an exploration of why *The West Wing’s* various political messages were received favorably by a politically diverse audience.

An examination of Sorkin’s public comments on the political bent of the show reveals that, as its creator, he is quick to try to diffuse the assumption that *The West Wing* is a liberal-leaning show. Talking to *Entertainment Weekly*, Sorkin states, “See, I would disagree that this is a liberal show... Bartlet is a Democrat, [but] we have seen him be very hawkish in response to a military attack, and [he chose not to] commute the sentence

⁴⁰⁴ Barney

⁴⁰⁵ Crawley, 107-8

of the first federal prisoner executed since 1963.”⁴⁰⁶ Not only does Sorkin argue that the political choices of *The West Wing*’s fictional president are at times conservative, but he also contends in an interview with Terence Smith from *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* that the overall values of the show itself reflect a type of conservatism as well, saying, “I think it’s a good idea to notice that *The West Wing* is a show that has no gratuitous violence, no gratuitous sex. It has featured the character of the president of the United States kneeling on the floor of the Oval Office and praying. This, I would think, would be exactly what conservative Republicans would want to see on television.”⁴⁰⁷

Sorkin also makes pains to point out that “the Democrats have been the enemy just as much as the Republicans have been the enemy” on *The West Wing*, and that he prefers to think of the show as acting as the “loyal opposition” to the real-life political administrations not only when President George W. Bush was in office, but also during the years the show overlapped with the Clinton administration.⁴⁰⁸ Often, when questioned about *The West Wing*’s political biases, Sorkin attempts to bring the conversation back to an assessment of the show on its artistic merits, not on its political merits. Continuing his interview with Terence Smith, Sorkin argues, “I don’t think that television shows or, for that matter, movies or plays or paintings or songs can be liberal or conservative. I think that they can only be good or bad.”⁴⁰⁹

Sorkin maintains that the pendulum is going to swing in both directions and that political viewpoints will at times be very nuanced for viewers who are paying attention.

⁴⁰⁶ Young Hoon Kim, “The Justice of Melodrama: *The West Wing*’s Coping Strategies in a World of Violence and Terror,” *The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)*, Fall 2009, Volume 8, Issue 2. Accessed November 14, 2015.

http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2009/kim.htm.

⁴⁰⁷ Aaron Sorkin, interview by Terence Smith

⁴⁰⁸ Crawley, 107-108, quoting Paris Barclay, “A Few Good Stories: Aaron Sorkin,” *The Advocate*, February 13, 2001.

⁴⁰⁹ Aaron Sorkin, interview by Terence Smith

As an example, he says, “We hear in the pilot episode that [President Bartlet] doesn’t like abortion and that he goes around the country encouraging young women not to have them, but that he absolutely does not believe that is something that the state can legislate.”⁴¹⁰ Ultimately, it is clear to Sorkin that no matter what he says or what he writes, he is going to have to continually combat the notion that *The West Wing* is a liberal show:

You can look at the pilot and think, gee, this is a left-leaning White House or certainly a left-leaning writer who took that kind of roundhouse punch at the religious right, but anybody who might be upset by the politics of the pilot episode, all you need to do is wait a week and you’ll likely be standing and cheering. I’m looking forward to being unpredictable on this show.⁴¹¹

Scholar Melissa Crawley, author of the book *Mr. Sorkin Goes to Washington*, provides some support for Sorkin’s claims that *The West Wing* was fairly balanced politically. Upon completing an analysis of the show’s plots and policy arguments, Crawley maintains that in most political discussions two or more sides of an issue are represented by various characters, and an outcome is rarely reached by the end of the episode. This approach allows multiple political viewpoints to be represented, and an audience member can choose to relate to any of them.⁴¹² For Sorkin, it is this process that provides the most interest as a writer, because it is within the process of political discussions between characters that tensions can mount and emotions can flare, allowing for the elevation within his storytelling of one of America’s most sacred ideals: the democratic process itself and the inherent value in debate.

In contrast to his staunch contention that *The West Wing* is not a liberal show, Sorkin has no hesitancy in admitting that he himself is liberal-leaning, and further, does

⁴¹⁰ Nancy Haught, “A true believer in ‘The West Wing,’” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 31, 2001.

⁴¹¹ Tom Feran, “Drama shows politics can succeed on TV,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 22, 1999.

⁴¹² Crawley, 103

not deny that his own personal views find their way into the show's scripts from time to time.⁴¹³ Commenting on the pilot episode, in which the religious right takes a verbal shellacking from President Bartlet for not denouncing acts of domestic terrorism performed in the name of Christianity, Sorkin says, "It wasn't my intention to paint the entire religious right with one brush... On the other hand, I admit that there are moments when I take a personal passion of mine and get up on a box and let you all know about it."⁴¹⁴ Sorkin's personal political opinions reveal themselves in broad ways as well. For example, as the series progresses the character of President Bartlet is developed to reveal deep intelligence. Sorkin admits that this creative decision and the conflicts Bartlet encounter as a result of his intelligence is a commentary on the "demonization of intellect" that Sorkin felt was indicative of the political climate in the early 2000s. He describes this phenomenon to Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly*, explaining that "being tagged as the smartest kid in your class turns into both a sense of arrogance and a sense of weakness – that an 'egghead' [cannot] see us through a world war."⁴¹⁵ Many critics and viewers alike saw Sorkin's writing choices as an indictment of President George W. Bush's intellect, the depth of which was questioned by pundits throughout Bush's presidency, thus furthering their assumptions that *The West Wing* was a liberal show.

Taking a moment to consider the views held by other staff members of the show, Executive Producer John Wells similarly maintains that *The West Wing* is neither a

⁴¹³ Sorkin has given over \$250,000 to Democratic candidates since 1999, and none to Republican candidates. One can search for individual records of campaign contributions through the Federal Election Commission website at <http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/norindsea.shtml>. For more examples from the media of how Sorkin identified politically, see Saraiya; Ellen, "The gay joke is becoming a staple of network TV," *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 1, 1999.

⁴¹⁴ Don Kaplan, "'Wing' and a Prayer," *New York Post*, July 31, 1999.

⁴¹⁵ Richard Just, "Cerebral Vortex," *The American Prospect*, May 23, 2003. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://prospect.org/article/cerebral-vortex>.

liberal nor a conservative show. “It’s a far more centrist Democratic White House than I think we actually get credit for.” He points out that the show had paid consultants from both parties on staff. Wells feels the Bartlet Administration is moderate on major issues including economic policy and use of military force. He does admit that one issue for which *The West Wing* has no desire to present a balanced view is gun control, saying that no one on staff believes in more lenient gun laws. In terms of NBC’s stance on the issue of *The West Wing*’s politics, Wells divulges that “All the network has asked us to do is present a very balanced view of an issue, to present both sides.” This actually helps the drama of the show, Wells explains in an *Orlando Sentinel* article in which he is quoted, because allowing two or more sides of an issue to be presented passionately by characters is what makes for “good scenes,” and that “you don’t want the other side to simply be a straw man that’s just there to get knocked down by your remarkably intelligent argument.” On the other hand, he admits that the audience is predisposed to wanting to see the protagonists prevail. “Our people need to win on the show. That’s the entertainment decision that you make. They lose, too, but you want them to win more than they lose.”⁴¹⁶

Despite Sorkin’s insistence that the show should be critiqued as nothing more than entertainment, *The West Wing* aims to present the most accurate picture possible of American governance, and therefore employed political consultants to assist with issue research and framing. Notably, only Democratic consultants were hired during the first season. They included former White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, U.S. Senate staffer-turned-journalist Lawrence O’Donnell, and Patrick Cadell, who conducted polls for President Jimmy Carter. Republican consultants joined the show’s staff for the

⁴¹⁶ Boedeker

second season: Peggy Noonan, a speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan, and Marlin Fitzwater, press secretary to both Reagan and President George H. W. Bush. More GOP consultants would be added in seasons to follow, including Ken Duberstein, who served as chief of staff to President Reagan, Frank Luntz, a Republican political consultant, and John Podhoretz, a speechwriter for both Reagan and George H. W. Bush and later a conservative columnist. Reuters quoted Wells as noting that Podhoretz has been one of *The West Wing*'s "staunchest critics" throughout its first few seasons.⁴¹⁷

The consultants were utilized by the writers to frame and provide context for two or more sides of a political issue. Consultant and writer Lawrence O'Donnell Jr. admits that the staff did lean Democratic, explaining that, "If in the script there is an argument about gun control, the most precious document you could produce at *The West Wing* that week is a passionate, intelligent case against gun control. We [already] know how to do the other one."⁴¹⁸ The show's writers were aware that they were reaching a broad audience and took pride in providing what they thought was a fair representation of issues. Discussing his work on the episode "Take This Sabbath Day," during which President Bartlet struggles with the decision to either stay a federal execution or let it proceed, co-writer Paul Redford says, "It was a tough issue to dramatize. It was balanced. It led to a terrific episode that wasn't overtly preachy about the powers of the president."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 12; Crawley, 109; Steve Gorman, "NBC's 'West Wing' to Take More Bipartisan Approach," FreeRepublic.com, September 18, 2003. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/985300/posts>; Frank Luntz, "President Bartlet, Please Take Me Back," *New York Times*, December 28, 2002. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/28/opinion/28LUNT.html?todayshadlines%22>, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/28/opinion/28LUNT.html?todayshadlines%22>

⁴¹⁸ Faye Foire, "Washington Casts an Eye on Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2001.

⁴¹⁹ Brian McTavish, "From Shawnee Mission East to 'The West Wing,'" *Kansas City Star*, October 6, 2000.

A balanced show and a balanced audience were also important to the executives at NBC, the show's network, because alienating viewers leads to lower ratings, and lower ratings translate into lower profit margins. Garth Ancier, who served as President of NBC Entertainment when *The West Wing* went on the air, believed that Sorkin would have to strike a balance in order to keep the show on television. Ancier revealed, "I told Aaron if [the show] was going to be a liberal soapbox, he'd have problems. Any kind of soapbox is inappropriate – though you can't do a White House that's completely moderate – because it would alienate roughly half his audience."⁴²⁰ It was reported by *US Magazine* when *The West Wing* was debuting that Sorkin missed the first hours of the pilot's filming because he was meeting with NBC executives, assuring them that they should not be concerned about the liberal leanings evident in the first episode.⁴²¹

Perception of *The West Wing*'s Political Slant Per the Critics

If the aims of *The West Wing*'s creator, producers, network executive, and writers were to produce a show that was politically balanced, were they successful? What did critics and audience members perceive the political slant of the show to be? On the whole, most critics readily acknowledged Sorkin's writing chops and his ability to skillfully tell a story, enthrall an audience regardless of the story's subject matter, and move his audience emotionally. Some critics thought that at times, Sorkin's characters were overly preachy, but most accepted that this was a side-effect they were willing to overlook because in general the writing was so superb. Many viewers feel the same way. Writing on the Yahoo! Sorkin Fan Message Board, user Melissa conveys how impressed

⁴²⁰ Shister

⁴²¹ Julian Rubinstein, "Politically Correct," *US Magazine*, October 1999.

she is by Sorkin's ability to "deliver the most cheesy overused stuff in TV and sell it, completley [sic] sell it so I beleive [sic] in it. It's really quite something."⁴²²

In terms of the show's perceived political slant, the conclusion drawn by a majority of television critics is overwhelmingly that *The West Wing* was a liberal show, though Richard Just questions this conclusion. In a piece written for *The American Prospect*, he shares his belief that many critics of the show, "overplayed *The West Wing*'s ideological component," dwelling too heavily on what they see as the show's liberal bent. Just argues that many viewers do not see Bartlet as a fulfillment of the liberal's ideal candidate; they see Bartlet as America's ideal candidate regardless of party because he improves upon both of the country's previous two presidents – Clinton and Bush – in ways where each of them failed. "The real fantasy," Just writes, "wasn't in imagining that the president was liberal – it was in imagining that the president had more ethical scruples than Bill Clinton, more intelligence than Bush and more seriousness of purpose than both put together." He continues by declaring that the liberal slant of the *The West Wing* has "always been secondary to the program's central message: that intelligence and moral purpose are the two most important attributes we ought to expect from our political leaders."⁴²³

Nevertheless, for many critics the show is remembered as "unabashedly liberal," as AVClub.com labels it.⁴²⁴ Television writers often take "the show's obvious leftward tilt" as a given, with a writer for the *Orlando Sentinel* theorizing that "any creative

⁴²² Melissa, October 22, 2001, comment on Yahoo! Groups, "New Group Questionnaire »

⁴²³ Just

⁴²⁴ Saraiya; "Extended Interview: Marlin Fitzwater," *PBS NewsHour*, September 8, 2000. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media-july-dec00-fitzwater_09-08/.

endeavor inevitably reflects its producer's values."⁴²⁵ John Podhoretz, who as noted would later become a consultant for the show, described *The West Wing* as "political pornography for liberals."⁴²⁶ Some see the addition of Republican political consultants during the second season as merely a token gesture. Frank Luntz, a one-time consultant for the show, suggests in an op-ed in the *New York Times* in 2002 that the conservative perspective should get more air time on *The West Wing*: "With so many people watching, learning, and blurring fact and fiction, an occasional affirmative Republican perspective wouldn't hurt."⁴²⁷

Yet others brush off criticisms from the right that the show is too liberal, maintaining that there are complaints of the show's political messaging from every position on the spectrum, from liberal to conservative. In *The Progressive*, Fred McKissack suggests that viewers and critics "drop the pretense that [*The West Wing*] is somehow a pro-lefty, commie-lovin' roll-a-doobie [show]," contending that that show has been known to underrepresent people of color and demonize the Third World, particularly Arabs.⁴²⁸

Viewers, like critics, seem to be split on the issue. Some believe that there is a clear liberal bent, but that the show depicts the opposition fairly. Yahoo! message board user cmbh123 contends that "despite its obvious bias I think the show gives a fair hearing to your typical small-government conservative, so it is not too jarring to [this] UK right-

⁴²⁵ Brown

⁴²⁶ John Podhoretz, "The Liberal Imagination," *The Weekly Standard*, March 27, 2000. Accessed November 10, 2015.

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/011/183dacgh.asp>.

⁴²⁷ Luntz

⁴²⁸ Fred McKissack, "The West Wing Is Not a Wet Dream," *The Progressive*, May 2000.

winger.”⁴²⁹ User johnjms calls himself a “moderate Conservative” and posts, “Sure, it has a tilt to the left, but that’s fine. It was going to tilt one way or the other, so I have no issues with that. For me, I love the way it shows people can disagree on issues, but still not portray (most of the time) the opposition as horrible.”⁴³⁰ User Diane agrees, writing, “I love that [Sorkin] makes an effort to present both sides of an issue.”⁴³¹ Still there are some that, as McKissack did in *The Progressive*, questioned the conception that *The West Wing* was exceptionally left-leaning. Yahoo! message board user Amanda believes the show “has been incredibly fair to moderates and conservatives and Republicans. To the point that liberals and some feminists (myself included) have been peeved. If the show was flamingly liberal, presumably I’d be happy as a clam every Wednesday evening. Not always so.”⁴³²

Some critics give Sorkin credit for taking on the difficult job of uniting an audience when the show’s topic – politics – is by nature divisive. However, writer Tim Goodman noted at the beginning of season four in 2002 that Republican viewers may run out of patience during Bartlet’s campaign against fictional Florida Governor Robert Ritchie, a Republican who was written to appear as anti-intellectual, or “Bush-like” as Goodman describes him. Such a storyline, he writes, “is bothersome to Republican viewers who have already given Sorkin a pass on this show about a liberal Democrat

⁴²⁹ cmbh123, May 31, 2014, (2:23 am), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1> (Accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴³⁰ johnjms, June 2, 2014, (2:22 pm), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1> (Accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴³¹ Diane, October 23, 2001 (7:15 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

⁴³² Amanda, November 27, 2002, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “TWW is ‘liberal’ etc.,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, November 27, 2002, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/25696>.

president who's three sex scandals away from being Bill Clinton" and, he posits, may hit a little too close to home for audience members who are Bush-supporters.⁴³³

The West Wing's Relationship with Reality

Hitting close to home is precisely what *The West Wing* did again and again throughout its time on the air. This show, which was experienced as liberal-leaning by most, had a multi-faceted relationship with reality. For instance, some aspects of it were far removed from reality in both big ways and small, as when the Bartlet Administration fought diplomatic battles with fictional countries. For some, the show offered an escape from reality at a time when the current state of politics in America was frustrating to them. In other instances, however, *The West Wing* was seen as a vehicle for providing an even closer depiction of reality than the news could. And finally, the show was able in some cases to influence reality by inspiring real-life politicians and educating its viewership.

In many ways, including the most obvious one – that it is a fictional television show – *The West Wing* is divorced from reality. One major critique Yair Rosenberg pursues in *The Atlantic* is that the show promotes the “fallacy of personality-driven politics,” that an elected official can win the day and achieve his or her political goals through charm alone. Rosenberg contends that on *The West Wing* “there are few impasses an eloquent appeal cannot solve” and that the standard obstacles faced by a presidential administration, from an oppositional Congress to antagonistic foreign states to skeptical American voters, “play only bit parts” in the White House’s quest to govern.

⁴³³ <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Disloyalty-oaths-Viewers-are-gripping-about-two-2777392.php>

Simply put, “the show overstates the power of personalities to triumph over fundamental political realities.”⁴³⁴

If only it were so. Rosenberg points out that part of President Obama’s success as a presidential candidate can be owed to the belief, or at least the hope, of voters that personality and good oratory were enough to implement a sweeping political agenda. Obama was not in office very long before those supporters who bought into the possibility of personality-driven politics were disappointed by what they considered to be unmet promises. “Building a democracy around *The West Wing*’s version of politics,” Rosenberg explains, “is setting one’s self up for disappointment.”⁴³⁵ However, it was this version of politics that many viewers sought out week after week precisely because it did *not* reflect reality.

The West Wing offers an escape to a parallel universe where playing witness to political machinations makes the audience feel better, not worse; happier, not dejected. This was especially the case for Democratic viewers during President George W. Bush’s presidency, which overlapped with the show’s airing from 2001-2006. In an article previewing the end of the series, the *New York Times* describes the show as having “found its creative niche by evoking a parallel reality, one that imagined how the White House might have been different if George W. Bush had not been elected to two terms.”⁴³⁶ Writing in 2005, an undergraduate at The George Washington University conveys the dark days for Democrats in the mid-2000s who were looking for a leader to inspire them:

⁴³⁴ Yair Rosenberg, “Why ‘The West Wing’ Is a Terrible Guide to American Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, October 1, 2012. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/10/why-the-west-wing-is-a-terrible-guide-to-american-democracy/263084/>.

⁴³⁵ Y. Rosenberg

⁴³⁶ Jacques Steinberg, “‘West Wing’ Writers’ Novel Way of Picking the President,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2006. Accessed November 11, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/10/arts/television/10wing.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print.

Everyday, Democrats like them wake up looking for someone to follow, but go to bed lost like blind men in the dark. To my dad and my roommates, President Bartlett is a ray of hope. Each episode gives them about an hour of what a better America and a strong Democratic Party would feel like. For 60 minutes, my dad feels like ordinary Americans matter in Washington and my roommates see a party leader they can get behind.⁴³⁷

For those against the Iraq War, which was gearing up during the show's third and fourth seasons, *The West Wing* also provided an alternate version of America in which the country is not at war. Martin Sheen, who plays President Bartlet and is himself an anti-war activist, noted the significance of this at the time.⁴³⁸ And during a time when civil liberties were being rolled back and the White House was becoming more opaque, *The West Wing* continued to lift the veil of the White House and allow viewers behind it.

But does *The West Wing* offer more than an escape to its viewers? Might it also offer an opposing, more powerful and meaningful relationship to reality? To offer one's audience an escape from the everyday is a worthy goal for a storyteller, but to offer edification? Motivation? Inspiration? Some see this as an attribute of *The West Wing*. Specifically, some saw the show at the time of its airing as more valuable to viewers than the news, and certainly more representative of reality. Yahoo! message board user Karen describes the show as "just so real and believable," while user Irene shares that it gives her "the feeling of being somehow involved in the process." User Sirpa exclaims that "the characters are so believable it's hard to believe there isn't [a] Bartlet administration" in the United States.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Curtis Whatley, "'West Wing' Addiction," *The GW Hatchet*, September 22, 2005. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.gwhatchet.com/2005/09/22/curtis-whatley-west-wing-addiction/>.

⁴³⁸ Steinberg

⁴³⁹ Sirpa, October 24, 2001 (4:12 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, "New Group Questionnaire"

It is worth noting here that there are scholars who declare that the delineation between news and entertainment has become meaningless.⁴⁴⁰ Communication scholars contend that in modern news reporting, a human interest dimension is prioritized and personality features of those covered are exploited. In other words, government leaders are seen as stars and politics is framed as a game.⁴⁴¹ News is merely another form of storytelling.⁴⁴² And television was, during the time *The West Wing* was on the air, the number one source Americans turned to for news.⁴⁴³ Darrell M. West explains that people tend to use information that is readily available to them for the purpose of evaluating candidates, and television is one of the most accessible sources of information.⁴⁴⁴

Notice the use of the word “information” and not “facts.” Any television show, whether it is the news or not, can provide information to viewers, *The West Wing* included. And while *The West Wing* exhibits some breaks from reality, in many ways it strives to closely represent details of life inside the White House and the way the United States government operates. Therefore, for much of the audience, the line between reality and fiction is heavily blurred. Crawley believes this establishes *The West Wing* as a “valuable” and “appropriate vehicle” to promote political discourse.⁴⁴⁵ She is not alone, and more voices will be added to hers below. But it is significant within this discussion of *The West Wing*’s relationship to reality to mention that one former employee in the White House budget office, Matthew Miller, believes that the show

⁴⁴⁰ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 5

⁴⁴¹ Barbara Pfetsch, “The News Shapers: Strategic Communication as a Third Force in Newsmaking,” *The Politics of News/The News of Politics*, Doris A. Graber, Denis McQuail, & Pippa Norris, eds., (Washington: CQ Press, 2nd ed., 2007), 75

⁴⁴² Manheim, 101

⁴⁴³ Althaus, Free Falls, 165

⁴⁴⁴ West, 153

⁴⁴⁵ Crawley, 133

actually does a better job of representing the reality of working for the President of the United States than the news. He contends that the show “presents a truer, more human picture of the people behind the headlines than most of today’s Washington journalists.” It is Miller’s assertion that the mainstream media deprives its audience of an accurate picture of day-to-day government machinations because it prefers to report on scandals, whereas *The West Wing* shows the mundane and the everyday, the good and noble along with the bad and disappointing.⁴⁴⁶

Joe Lockhart, former press secretary to President Clinton, agrees, declaring that *The West Wing*’s contribution is that it conveys the more positive values of public servants, such as their good intentions and dedication to their jobs.⁴⁴⁷ As a storytelling vehicle, *The West Wing* is able to dramatize aspects of the daily work of government employees that would never be considered interesting enough to cover by the traditional media. Marlin Fitzwater echoes this in an interview with PBS’s Terrence Smith that took place shortly after he joined *The West Wing* as a consultant, sharing his opinion that the show “rings true to me in so many different ways.” Fitzwater elaborates,

I think it accurately portrays so many of the aspects of the White House that people never get to see and can’t know about... It shows the camaraderie that I think is real in every White House, and whether you agree with what they do or not, they’re trying to do the best they can by their party, their country and their president.

Smith follows up by asking Fitzwater to clarify: “Are you saying then that [*The West Wing* writers] in certain ways get at the truth better or more successfully than the

⁴⁴⁶ Matthew Miller, “Real White House: Can a Smart TV Show Inspire Interest in Public Life in Ways Real Politics Brought to Us by the Real Press Corps Can’t?,” *Brill’s Content* 3, March 2000, 88-90

⁴⁴⁷ Crawley, 120

conventional news approach?” Fitzwater responds, “I think in some ways they can dramatize things that happen that you’ll never see any other way.”⁴⁴⁸

For many viewers and critics alike, then, *The West Wing* was believed to have a firm and stable relationship with reality. This instills fear in some people, actually, and an example of this can be seen in an op-ed published by the *Orlando Sentinel* entitled, “‘*West Wing*’: Fictional Fraud Breaches Real Trust.” Its author, Peter Brown, articulates his concern that President Bartlet’s concealment of his diagnosis with multiple sclerosis will further promote the assumption that politicians cannot be trusted.⁴⁴⁹ Though others might see Brown’s concern as an overreaction, it provides evidence for an argument Communication scholar Trevor Parry-Giles makes that contemporary American political culture is made uncomfortable by the role and power of political images.⁴⁵⁰ Hollywood, on the other hand, does not feel the same discomfort. The power of images, political and otherwise, is a tool entertainment professionals brandish skillfully throughout their storytelling. The next section will launch into a consideration of the ways in which Sorkin’s storytelling on *The West Wing* has an educational and influential impact, beginning with a discussion of how the medium of television as a whole impacts society.

⁴⁴⁸ “Extended Interview: Marlin Fitzwater”

⁴⁴⁹ Brown

⁴⁵⁰ Trevor Parry-Giles, “Resisting a ‘Traacherous Piety’: Issues, Images, and Public Policy Deliberation in Presidential Campaigns,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 2010.

“I know this! I watched *The West Wing!*”
White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest⁴⁵¹

***The West Wing* as Educational and Influential**

Since the advent and proliferation of television in homes across the country, television has come to play a more and more significant role in the socialization of Americans.⁴⁵² This makes sense, given that a majority of what one sees on television takes the form of story, whether it is a fictional show, an advertisement, or a news program.⁴⁵³ These stories shape viewers individually and American cultures and subcultures. Specifically, Michael Saenz explains that watching television is a “persistent social practice” that has become “strategically important in audiences’ construction and accommodation of their culture.” People watch television and see a reflection of their culture, simultaneously absorbing cues about the cultures they live in. Saenz goes on, elucidating how television provides viewers with fodder for the negotiation of their daily lives, relying on several prominent theorists to underscore his argument:

[Television] provides them with a continually problematized store of ‘implicit social knowledge’ (Taussig 1987, 303). People inscribe portions of that knowledge into their lives partially and selectively, by their subsequent actions. When their actions are played out as discursive strategies, television ‘induces the effects of power’ (Foucault 1980b). When they are played out tactically to nondiscursive (and potentially counterhegemonic) ends, viewers end up ‘poaching’ on television, which has thereby served as a ‘proper place’ for American culture (de Certeau 1984). In all this, television does not act as a strict cause of social life, or reflection of it, but as material used in making meaning and

⁴⁵¹ “Big Block of Cheese Day Is Back, and It’s Feta Than Ever,” The White House, January 16, 2015. Accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/01/16/big-block-cheese-day-back-and-its-feta-ever>.

⁴⁵² Crawley, 3

⁴⁵³ Gary Hoppenstand, “Editorial: Selling as Narrative,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 42, No. 2, April 2009, pp 213-214.

action, as a component of ‘doxa’ used in the production of social practices (Bourdieu 1986, 164).⁴⁵⁴

In contrast, television critics do not need modern Western philosophers to tell them that *The West Wing* was educating its audience, as evidenced by the disgruntled *Orlando Sentinel* op-ed mentioned above. To watch *The West Wing* is to be reminded of elementary civics lessons learned in one’s youth and to build upon those with new educational political discoveries. Several of the show’s political consultants acknowledge that the series is educational, with some expressing their belief that it should be exploited in this capacity.⁴⁵⁵ Dee Dee Myers, former Clinton press secretary and one of the show’s first consultants, echoes Fitzwater’s feelings above that “there’s a great opportunity...to explain issues that are sometimes too complex or too obscure feeling for the press to make interesting and accessible.”⁴⁵⁶ Frank Luntz writes, “for better or worse, Americans by the millions get their information about politics from *The West Wing*,” adding that they are doing this through a process of “blurring fact and fiction.”⁴⁵⁷ Posts from the Sorkin fan Yahoo! message board underscore Luntz’s statement. Many board participants talk about how they learn something whenever they watch the show.⁴⁵⁸ As a piece of popular culture, *The West Wing* became a reference point for actual public servants. In 2000, *Time Magazine* told the story of a playful jab Clinton Chief of Staff John Podesta made at then-Press Secretary Joe Lockhart: “Last month, while sitting in the Oval Office monitoring a briefing session with Clinton and his

⁴⁵⁴ Michael Saenz, “Television Viewing as Cultural Practice,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 16: 2, Summer 1992, 37

⁴⁵⁵ For an example, see Eric Mink, “‘West Wing’ Boldly Confronts Disease,” *New York Daily News*, January 19, 2000.

⁴⁵⁶ Miller, 95

⁴⁵⁷ Luntz

⁴⁵⁸ Christine, October 23, 2001, Britt, October 23, 2001 (12:15 am), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

Mideast advisers, chief of staff John Podesta jokingly slipped a note to Lockhart that read, ‘If this were *West Wing*, C.J. wouldn’t be at this meeting.’”⁴⁵⁹

Some argue that *The West Wing* was purposefully written with the intention of being educational, though Sorkin shrugs off such a suggestion when pressed on the subject by Lawrence K. Altman of the *New York Times*: “As storytellers primarily, our only obligation is to captivate for however long we have asked for your attention.”⁴⁶⁰ But several of the show’s actors see themselves as educators, in a way. Stockard Channing, who plays First Lady Abbey Bartlet, says she believes *The West Wing* “allows people to see things about how things work in government that they never knew before.”⁴⁶¹ In the first season’s sixth episode, “Mr. Willis of Ohio,” the primary plot centers on a vote in Congress concerning the U.S. Census and heavily involves fictional Press Secretary C.J. Cregg. Allison Janney, who plays Cregg, offers her reaction to participating in the episode and her belief that it offered an education to viewers: “I learned, right along with C.J., as did my friends who watched the show. And now I can guarantee you everyone who saw that show is going to fill out their census because they saw how, and they learned how important it actually was and what it means.”⁴⁶² In 2010, during a reunion photo shoot of *The West Wing* cast hosted by *EW*, Janney mentions the fact that professional educators also saw the educational value of the show. “There were teachers

⁴⁵⁹ Jay Branegan, “You Could Call It the Wonk Wing,” *Time Magazine*, May 15, 2000.

⁴⁶⁰ McMillan, Graeme McMillan, “Revisiting *The West Wing*: A Stirring, Comforting Fantasy,” *Time*, April 19, 2013. Accessed April 19, 2013. <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/04/19/revisiting-the-west-wing-a-stirring-comforting-fantasy/>; Lawrence K. Altman, M.D., “Very Real Questions for Fictional President,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2001.

⁴⁶¹ De’Borah Bankston, “Tate Brings ‘Pink Lady’ Back to School,” *The Daily Campus*, March 17, 2004. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://www.smudailycampus.com/news/tate-brings-pink-lady-back-to-school>.

⁴⁶² Aaron Sorkin, Interview with Terence Smith

that lived on my street who made their students – [*The West Wing*] was required, you know, watching – viewing.”⁴⁶³

Some of the show’s writers, too, see themselves as educators. Laurence O’Donnell, Senate-staffer turned *The West Wing* consultant turned political television host, suggests that, “Political talk on TV has degenerated so much, [whereas] you can say something complex on *The West Wing* and you will not suffer a screaming interruption by three other panelists.”⁴⁶⁴ Not to mention that the series was able to educate on non-political issues, such as the challenges and realities of life as an individual with multiple sclerosis.

It is worth noting that since the series has been off the air, former cast members have assembled in several instances to participate in public service announcements that serve to educate the public on a number of issues. In April 2012, Martin Sheen, Allison Janney, Dule Hill (who played personal aide to the President Charlie Young), Joshua Malina (who replaced Rob Lowe on the show), Melissa Fitzgerald (who played C.J.’s assistant, Carol), and William Duffy (who played economic policy staffer Larry) appeared in a two-minute video on the humor website FunnyOrDie.com to promote Kaiser Permanente’s “Every Body Walk” campaign.⁴⁶⁵ Just a few months later, in September 2012, an even bigger reunion took place, when nine members of the cast made a public service announcement on the importance of voting for non-partisan candidates on Election Day. The video included Sheen, Janney, Malina, Fitzgerald, Bradley

⁴⁶³ Entertainment Weekly, “‘The West Wing’ EW.com Reunion 2010,” *YouTube* video, 3:31. Accessed November 11, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3g50Q8nuMQ>.

⁴⁶⁴ Steinberg

⁴⁶⁵ Funny or Die, “Walk & Talk – The West Wing Reunion,” *YouTube* video, 2:28. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/3dc51a407a/walk-and-talk-the-west-wing-reunion.>; Homepage, Every Body Walk!, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://everybodywalk.org/>.

Whitford, Richard Schiff, Mary McCormack (who played Deputy National Security Adviser Kate Harper in the final three seasons), Janel Moloney (who played Josh's assistant Donna Moss), and Lily Tomlin (who played secretary to the President Deborah Fiderer). The former cast members donated their time to make the video, the production cost of which was funded by McCormack's sister, Bridget Mary McCormack, who was on the ballot that fall as a candidate for Michigan's State Supreme Court.⁴⁶⁶ Most recently, former cast members appear in videos to promote the Obama Administration's First and Second Annual Virtual Big Block of Cheese Day, in January 2014 and January 2015 respectively. "Big Block of Cheese Day" was featured in two episodes of *The West Wing*, during which the Bartlet Administration would take meetings with interest groups whose issues were so specific that they otherwise might not get the attention of White House staffers.⁴⁶⁷ Whitford and Malina participated the first year, with McCormack, Hill, Schiff, Janney, and Sheen joining for the second year. Obama's version of Big Block of Cheese Day brought the event online, making members of the administration available to answer questions hash-tagged on social media with #AsktheWH.

The example of Obama's Big Block of Cheese Day is interesting for several reasons. First, it offers an instance where a *The West Wing* storyline influenced political

⁴⁶⁶ The Reliable Source, "How Michigan Judicial Candidate Bridget Mary McCormack Got 'The West Wing' Cast for her Campaign Video," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2012. Accessed November 11, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/post/how-michigan-judicial-candidate-bridget-mary-mccormack-got-the-west-wing-cast-for-her-campaign-video/2012/09/20/a2d53326-0347-11e2-91e7-2962c74e7738_blog.html.; Bridget Mary McCormack, "Walk and Talk the Vote – West Wing Reunion," *YouTube* video, 4:03. November 11, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v52FLMOPSig>.

⁴⁶⁷ "The Crackpots and These Women." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Anthony Drazan. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail." *The West Wing: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Paul Redford & Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Jessica Yu. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; "The First-Ever Virtual 'Big Block of Cheese Day' – The White House is Open for Questions," The White House, January 29, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/01/29/first-ever-virtual-big-block-cheese-day-white-house-open-questions>.; "Big Block of Cheese Day Is Back, and It's Feta Than Ever"

reality, in this case inspiring real life events. The show's version of the day is very loosely based on historical accounts of President Andrew Jackson placing a 1,400-pound block of cheddar cheese in the White House in February 1837 and inviting in ordinary citizens to partake. So while Sorkin did rely on previous historical events to conjure up a plot device in *The West Wing*, it is the show itself that brought the historical event into the consciousness of modern-day Americans.⁴⁶⁸ It should be noted that in the video for the Second Annual Virtual Big Block of Cheese Day, when the cast members are trying to explain to White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest what the original concept for the event is, he replies, "I know this! I watched *The West Wing*!" Second, it offers yet another example of the former cast members taking seriously their characters' ability to educate the public, even nearly a decade after the show went off the air.

The Obama Administration's adoption of Bartlet's Big Block of Cheese Day tradition is just one of many instances in which real life politicians were influenced by fictional storylines and plot devices from *The West Wing*. From the beginning of its airing, politicians were watching the show. In 2000, at the tail end of the Clinton Administration and at the close of the first season of the series, archives at the Clinton Library reveal that National Security Advisor Sandy Berger repeatedly made a joke in policy speeches referencing his displeasure that Aaron Sorkin did not feature someone in his position on Bartlet's staff.⁴⁶⁹ Congressional politicians and their staffers also appropriated ideas from the show. In December 2000, during *The West Wing*'s second

⁴⁶⁸ Meghan Keneally, "How the White House Is Taking Cues from 'The West Wing,'" *ABC News*, January 20, 2015. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/white-house-taking-cues-west-wing/story?id=28356909>; Darren Samuelsohn, "Berger's Response to Sorkin," *Politico*, February, 28, 2014. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/sandy-berger-aaron-sorkin-104093.html>.

⁴⁶⁹ Samuelson

season, Democratic Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (NY-12) asked President Clinton to use his executive power under the Antiquities Act to declare as national monuments two former military forts on Governor's Island. The *New York Post* reports that Maloney got the idea to ask Clinton to evoke the Antiquities Act from *The West Wing*, which referenced it in the first season episode titled "Enemies."⁴⁷⁰ Political wonks from all corners are inspired by the series, and find themselves quoting memorable lines in order to inspire others. Naomi Klein, a well-known Canadian writer and social activist, witnessed and spoke about this phenomenon after participating in an economic roundtable at the University of Toronto.⁴⁷¹

Inspiration is considered to be one of the hallmark effects of Sorkin's writing. Television critics have made strong statements about *The West Wing's* ability to inspire both politicians and those with a burgeoning interest in politics. Doug Mataconis, a senior editor for political site *OutsidetheBeltway.com*, declares that "it's undeniable that *The West Wing* did have an influence on people who were involved or interested in politics at the time it aired."⁴⁷² Writing in *Vanity Fair*, Juli Weiner indicates that even years after the series went off the air, "you might think the series never ended, given the currency it still seems to enjoy in Washington, the frequency with which it comes up in D.C. conversations and is quoted or referenced on political blogs." She theorizes that this is because the young adults who came of age when *The West Wing* was on the air now staff the politicians holding office, and goes further to say that for many of the young

⁴⁷⁰ Michael Starr, "Maloney 'Wings' It on Hopeful Legislation," *New York Post*, December 13, 2000.

⁴⁷¹ Naomi Klein, "Prime Time's Political Sedatives," *The Globe and Mail*, May 17, 2000.

⁴⁷² Doug Mataconis, "The West Wing and American Politics," *OutsideTheBeltway.com*, October 1, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/the-west-wing-and-american-politics/>.

staffers, the show is what spurred them to enter the world of politics in the first place.⁴⁷³

Bradley Whitford shares that “young people will often come up to me and say... ‘You’re part of the reason I got into politics.’”⁴⁷⁴ AVClub.com’s Sonia Saraiya makes the claim that Sorkin’s inspiration of young politicians is what enabled President Obama to ascend to the presidency. She writes, “*The West Wing* may prove to be the most influential television show of the golden age of television,” because, she argues,

The West Wing changed American politics. It was instrumental in creating a sense of mission and purpose about government in a particularly cynical and despairing age. And that, in turn, inspired young people, who went in droves to work for campaigns, make calls for progressive candidates, and agitate for change in government. Simply put, it’s hard to imagine Obama For America’s success without its fictional precursor, Bartlet For America—the campaign for President Bartlet’s re-election in the show.⁴⁷⁵

While Saraiya certainly makes a bold assertion, she is not alone in wondering how much of an influence *The West Wing* had, not only on Obama’s campaign and election, but also his presidency. In the final seasons of *The West Wing*, as Bartlet’s second term is coming to an end, a fictional presidential campaign takes place between Democratic Congressman Matthew Santos of Texas (played by Jimmy Smits) and Republican U.S. Senator Arnold Vinick of California (played by Alan Alda). To many television critics and political writers, it seems clear that Santos is written to evoke up-and-coming politician and presidential hopeful Barack Obama, who had just been catapulted onto the national political stage at the Democratic Convention in 2004. Peter Funt, writing in the *Washington Post*, enumerates the many similarities between the fictional Santos and real-life Obama, explaining that it is not far-fetched that the writers on *The West Wing* had the

⁴⁷³ Juli Weiner, “West Wing Babies,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2012.

⁴⁷⁴ Will Harris, “Bradley Whitford on *Happyish*, *The West Wing*, and His High Heels on *Transparent*,” AVClub.com, June 16, 2015. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.avclub.com/article/bradley-whitford-happyish-west-wing-and-his-high-h-220658>.

⁴⁷⁵ Saraiya

insight to write Obama's campaign narrative two years before it happened. Not only was the Santos character created by someone experienced in American government at the highest levels – Eli Attie, a former speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore – but just as Attie was creating the fictional campaign in mid-2004, his friend David Axelrod suggested to him that Obama was on the rise and his profile presented the perfect basis for Attie's new character.

Funt reports that Axelrod, who went on to become the Obama campaign's chief strategist, emailed back and forth with Attie for a year as the Santos character and plot were fully fleshed out. Funt then asks, "To what degree did *The West Wing* create a test market for a minority [presidential] candidate? By campaigning to have his guy portrayed in a network hit, did Axelrod soften up millions of Americans for the task of electing the first minority president?"⁴⁷⁶ These are fascinating questions. Martin Sheen believes the show "served as a measure of inspiration and possibility. And maybe we had a little bit to do with planting some seeds that helped the reality of President Obama's election."⁴⁷⁷ At the conclusion of Funt's article, he reports that in May 2008, Axelrod emailed Attie to say, "We're living your script." Perhaps *The West Wing* did get voters used to the idea of a minority president. Perhaps it even inspired them at the voting booth. And perhaps it also influenced President Obama himself, especially when he asked his former primary opponent Hillary Clinton to be his Secretary of State, just as the fictional Santos did with his Republican opponent Arnold Vinick.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ Peter Funt, "A Race Straight Out of a 'West Wing' Rerun," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2008. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/25/AR2008052502282.html>.

⁴⁷⁷ Entertainment Weekly

⁴⁷⁸ "Good Lessons From the Tube"

By the time the Santos-Vinick campaign storyline begins on season six of *The West Wing*, Sorkin had already left the show. As the fourth season was concluding, ratings were not what they had been and his habits of delivering scripts late or last-minute and going over budget were beginning to wear on executives, leading to Sorkin's departure. But Sorkin's reputation for writing unparalleled political oratory did not suffer, and he continues to be held up as the standard for inspirational, uplifting, powerful political writing, despite the fact that he was speechwriter to a fictional president. Indeed, critics have noted that Obama and his speechwriters emulate Sorkin's style in many instances. For example, following the Democratic National Convention in 2012, at which Obama was nominated for re-election, a piece in *The New Yorker* proposes that Obama and his fellow Democrats were exuding a Sorkin-like confidence and, perhaps uncharacteristically, were exhibiting "the kind of proud, defiant liberalism that served as animating spirit for *The West Wing*."⁴⁷⁹ The author notes a specific moment wherein Obama delivered "soaring rhetoric" when he said in his acceptance speech, "Times have changed, and so have I. I'm no longer just a candidate. I'm the President." *The New Yorker* article declares, "in its cadence and resoluteness, the phrase evoked a singular moment of political cinematic camp [from] the Sorkin-scripted [film], 'The American President.'" In the film, Michael Douglas plays U.S. President Andrew Shepherd, who is running for reelection and challenges his opponent to conduct a serious campaign: "If you want to talk about character and American values, fine. Just tell me where and when, and I'll show up. This is a time for serious people, Bob, and your fifteen minutes are up.

⁴⁷⁹ "'The West Wing' Dream of Democracy," *The New Yorker*, Culture Desk, September 21, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/09/the-west-wing-and-the-2012-dnc.html>.

My name is Andrew Shepherd, and I *am* the President.”⁴⁸⁰ The night the speech aired, NBC’s news anchor Brian Williams and MSNBC’s political host Keith Olbermann also noted how similar Obama’s line was to the line Douglas delivers in *The American President*.⁴⁸¹ Just a month earlier, at a Democratic fundraiser at which both men were present, Obama himself thanked Sorkin for his support of the party and credited Sorkin with inspiring politicians with his writing, telling the audience that Sorkin “writes the way every Democrat in Washington wished they spoke.”⁴⁸²

Perhaps the most significant piece of evidence that Sorkin and his writing skills are taken seriously by the political world has been the response of professional political operatives treating Sorkin as an expert political player. Writing near the close of season four in *The Guardian*, Oliver Burkeman reports on the rumor that members of Congress who were interested in getting the word out on proposed legislation and getting an idea for how it might be received would, before conducting focus groups or talking to the press, reach out to Sorkin. “If the avuncular, public-spirited administration of Josiah ‘Jeb’ Bartlet could only be persuaded to take an idea on board, the reasoning went, that guaranteed it a public airing and an intelligent mulling of its benefits – more, perhaps, than it might be assured in the real world.”⁴⁸³ So, too, was Sorkin courted by party fundraisers, not only as a donor, but as an ad-writer. *The Atlantic* reported in 2004, a

⁴⁸⁰ *The American President*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Rob Reiner. Castle Rock, 2008. DVD.

⁴⁸¹ Nikki Finke, “Why Do NBC Anchors Love Aaron Sorkin?,” *Deadline Hollywood*, August 29, 2008. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.deadline.com/2008/08/why-do-nbc-anchors-love-aaron-sorkin/>.

⁴⁸² Geoff Herbert, “Pres. Obama Praises Syracuse University Alumnus Aaron Sorkin at Fundraiser,” *Syracuse Post-Standard*, August 7, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2012/08/obama_praises_aaron_sorkin_anne_hathaway_weinstein_fundraiser.html.

⁴⁸³ Oliver Burkeman, “Next Week on The West Wing...Erm,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2003. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/may/07/television.channel4>.

year after Sorkin left *The West Wing*, that Sorkin teamed up with Hollywood producer Rob Reiner to write an anti-Bush advertisement for the liberal website MoveOn.org.⁴⁸⁴

Sorkin was also given the chance to offer advice to then-candidate Barack Obama in the pages of the *New York Times* and in the “voice” of fictional President Bartlet. For her weekly column in the op-ed pages on September 21, 2008, Maureen Dowd offered her column inches to Sorkin, wherein he wrote the fictional story of a meeting between candidate Obama and Bartlet. In it, he implores Obama to call out his opponent U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), and his opponent’s running mate Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK), on the lies and hypocrisy Bartlet sees them perpetuating. Bartlet also encourages him not to shrug off the “elitist” label that has been lobbed at Obama, but instead to embrace it and make the American people understand that to excel and to be above average is part of the American dream.⁴⁸⁵ Four years later, on October 6, 2012, as Obama was running his reelection campaign against Republican candidate Mitt Romney, Dowd once again invited Sorkin to share “Bartlet’s” advice with Obama through a fictional account of a conversation between the two. This opportunity to advise Obama came shortly after his less-than-stellar debate performance against Romney. Yet again, Bartlet encouraged Obama to take his opponent to task regarding the mistruths Romney was repeating about Obama’s record as president, and to exude more confidence in the immensity of his accomplishments.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ Eric Alterman, “The Hollywood Campaign,” *The Atlantic*, September 2004. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/09/the-hollywood-campaign/303431/>.

⁴⁸⁵ Maureen Dowd, “Seeking A President Who Gives You Goose Bumps? So’s Obama.,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2008. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=980DE2D61E30F932A1575AC0A96E9C8B63&ref=aaron.sorkin>.

⁴⁸⁶ Maureen Dowd, “Two Presidents, Smoking and Scheming,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/opinion/sunday/dowd-two-presidents-smoking-and-scheming.html?pagewanted=1&_r=3&smid=fb-share.

***The West Wing* as an Influential Story**

If *The West Wing*'s serial storytelling is both educational and influential, evidence for which has been presented in the preceding sections, then how does a fictional television show manage to achieve this? Is Sorkin's storytelling purposefully educational and influential? Does it matter if it is, or only matter that those are its results? The contention of this chapter is that it does not, because either way, as noted above, television as a medium is credited with molding and socializing cultures and subcultures. While the show's creators are careful not to admit any purposeful attempts on behalf of *The West Wing* to educate and influence its audience, they are vocal on what they see as the show's primary purpose: to entertain. Critics of the show are more willing to make claims as to the show's secondary effect, suggesting that it is both educational and influential.

The show's creators have made several relevant public statements on the topic of *The West Wing*'s purpose. Sorkin has stated time and again in the media that his primary goal in creating and writing *The West Wing* was to entertain an audience "for however long we have asked for your attention." He has even gone so far as to say that entertainment is the show's "first and foremost, if not only" aim.⁴⁸⁷ "We're not telling anyone to eat their vegetables," Sorkin has said.⁴⁸⁸ Crawley agrees that the "ultimate project" of any television drama is to "construct compelling stories."⁴⁸⁹ Sorkin specifically underscores his contention that the show is only meant to be entertaining in the context of defending the show and lowering the bar for what is expected of it as people question why he wrote something the way he did: "I promise you that moment in

⁴⁸⁷ Altman

⁴⁸⁸ Aaron Sorkin, interview with Terence Smith

⁴⁸⁹ Crawley, 4-5

the show happened for the exact same reason every moment on every show happened: I thought people would like it.”⁴⁹⁰

In that way, it is worth noting that Sorkin’s emphasizing that *The West Wing* is meant to be entertainment and entertainment only is a convenient excuse when a critic voices a quibble about the content of his storytelling. Schlamme capitalizes on the same strategy, particularly when attempting to deflate criticisms concerning the veracity of the show, stating in interviews that *The West Wing* is storytelling, nothing more, and that critics must remember that the show is fiction. *The West Wing*, he says, is “not a history lesson or civics lesson or accuracy of government.”⁴⁹¹ However, as Crawley points out, Sorkin invites critiques about the authenticity of the show because his scripts center on actual political issues and he relies on the advice of professional political operatives to write them.⁴⁹² As real and timely as the political issues were at the point they were addressed on the show, Schiff, who plays White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler, supports Sorkin’s claims that he prioritizes the emotional connections of the story, rather than the political realities. Citing a season one episode dealing with the death penalty and suggestions Schiff had for ramping up conflict in the episode, Schiff says that at the end of the day, “Aaron is ultimately interested in the emotional involvement of the story lines.”⁴⁹³

If Sorkin and Schlamme are to be taken at their word, then they seem to be saying that they did not intend to influence *The West Wing*’s audience beyond making them feel

⁴⁹⁰ Tyler McLeod, “West Wing Finale Shot Down,” *Calgary Sun*, July 15, 2000.

⁴⁹¹ Lynn Elber, “*West Wing* Walks Fine Line of Fiction, Political Reality,” *AP*, April 23, 2002.

⁴⁹² Crawley, 111

⁴⁹³ Richard Schiff, appearance on The O’Reilly Factor, October 22, 2000, as quoted on WestWingEpGuide.com, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.westwingepguide.com/S1/Episodes/14_TTSD.html.

entertained. However, based on other statements Sorkin made to the press, one can see that offering a comment on the political happenings of the times was something admits to doing as the primary writer and creator of the show. For instance, in season three, Sorkin admits that he wrote the storyline of the PhD-toting, world-class economist President Bartlet running for re-election against the folksy Florida Governor Robert Ritchie, who either is not terribly smart or downplays whatever intelligence he has in order to appear relatable, as a direct reaction to his frustration with Vice President and then-Presidential candidate Al Gore as he too attempted to minimize his intelligence during his debates with his opponent, then-Governor of Texas George W. Bush. Sorkin explains, “We’re a completely fictional, nonpolitical show, but one of our motors is doing our version of the old *Mad* magazine ‘Scenes We’d Like to See.’ And so to an extent we’re going to rerun the last election and try a few different plays than the Gore campaign did.”⁴⁹⁴

Critics recognize Sorkin’s desire for an alternate reality, even as simply in how he presents Washington, D.C. and the White House as a whole. Patrick D. Healy writes in the *New York Times* that, “In trying to show how Washington works, *The West Wing* has also sought to comment on it, by offering an idealized version of the White House and the public servants working there.”⁴⁹⁵ In other words, just the portrayal in and of itself is a commentary. There were other critics who flat out do not believe Sorkin when he says that his only aim in writing *The West Wing* was to entertain. The *Atlantic Monthly*’s Chris Lehman maintains that the show had an “overt agenda” to encourage faith in

⁴⁹⁴ Tad Friend, “Snookered By Bush,” *The New Yorker*, March 4, 2002. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/03/04/020304ta_talk_friend?printable=true¤tPage=all#ixz34BMAsqwP.

⁴⁹⁵ Patrick D. Healy, “A Fictional Presidency Confronts a Leak, Too,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2005. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/29/arts/television/29wing.html?pagewanted=print>.

America's governmental institutions, promote patriotism, and to uphold an ideal of "executive liberalism."⁴⁹⁶

Then, of course, there are some who believe – this author included – that no story is told purely for entertainment value, as discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. Several scholars offer opinions on storytelling, performance, and television that support the claim that stories have innate aims beyond entertainment. First and foremost, literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall notes that fiction as a medium has a tendency to preach.⁴⁹⁷ Secondly, Herman Gray, in writings concerning race in the 1980s, claims that television is "never just a neutral player, an invisible conduit, in [its] representations and constructions," but that it is "a significant social site for shaping, defining, contesting, and representing claims about American society."⁴⁹⁸ Diana Taylor, writing in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, maintains that authenticity is not a concern for the theatrical – just as Sorkin contends – but that what it strives for is to be effectual, to have an effect.⁴⁹⁹ And Niklas Luhman asserts that the goal of entertainment is to inspire audience members to relate to what they are hearing and viewing – in other words, to apply it to their lives.⁵⁰⁰ These scholars and many others are saying that stories often have a message; a message that shapes its audience, affects its audience, and begs its audience to apply its lessons to their experiences.

While Sorkin may diminish any intent he may have had for *The West Wing* to have such effects, it remains undeniable that the show both frames and primes the issues

⁴⁹⁶ Chris Lehmann, "The Feel Good Presidency," *The Atlantic*, March 2001. Accessed November 17, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/03/the-feel-good-presidency/302138/>.

⁴⁹⁷ Gottschall, 132

⁴⁹⁸ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 15

⁴⁹⁹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 13

⁵⁰⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2000).

it tackles for its viewers. Political communication scholar James A. Gardner explains that framing “weaves facts into a consistent and easily understood narrative that increases the likelihood that voters will reach one evaluation of the facts rather than another.”⁵⁰¹ *The West Wing* not only frames political issues within its narratives, but also primes particular aspects of those issues, meaning that it calls attention to certain matters while ignoring others.⁵⁰² All of these processes happen naturally when Sorkin chooses what aspects of an issue to include and highlight in any given storyline. And regardless of whether those processes are intentional or not, they have an effect. Yahoo! user Tina writes about the effect *The West Wing* has on water cooler chats in the office. The show, she says, “makes me think, and it prompts debate among those of us at work who watch the show. Of course, once we start talking about the issues [Sorkin] brought up on the last show, other people who don’t watch feel compelled to join the debate (and some have been compelled to start watching). It has a lovely ripple effect.” She finishes her post by asking, “I wonder if [Sorkin] knows that happens?”⁵⁰³

As discussed above, it is apparent that *The West Wing* has the ability to influence how an issue is framed in the minds of its audience, such as in the case of the episode about the U.S. Census, and it has also offered ideas to government officials on how to frame the political issues being dramatized by *The West Wing*, evidence for which has also been presented. Therefore, whether any political messaging was intentional on the part of Sorkin and *The West Wing*’s other producers, the show nevertheless stands as an example of storytelling that carries a message alongside and within its storyline.

⁵⁰¹ Gardner, 107-8

⁵⁰² *Campaign Warriors*, James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson, eds. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2013), 99

⁵⁰³ Tina, October 22, 2001 (10:55 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

The Power of Storytelling as a Medium

Taking a moment to step away from the discussion of whether Sorkin intends for *The West Wing* to have an impact on its audience aside from an emotional one, under consideration in this section is the question of what storytelling as a medium has the power to do. If stories have the ability to transmit cultural, political, and academic knowledge, either discreetly or overtly, how influential can these different types of knowledge be on the audience?

Broadly, experts believe stories influence humans in several ways. Gottschall proposes that “the human mind was shaped *for* story, so that it could be shaped *by* story.” Even more graphically, he contends that a storyteller “penetrates our skulls and seizes control of our brains.”⁵⁰⁴ While that might be an overstatement, the point is that stories shape the beliefs, values, and behaviors of humans, and they do so through their reliance on a universal structure that – based on its cultural ubiquity – is understood by humans on a subconscious level.

As mentioned in chapter three, scholar Stephen Duncombe explains that stories help humans organize and order the large amount of data they encounter on a daily basis and, once organized, stories enable humans to make sense of it. He is purposeful in his choice of words: humans *make* the sense they come to view as common.⁵⁰⁵ Common sense then, too, is a cultural construction, constructed in large part by stories. This is perhaps one of the reasons that stories are often preferred to bare facts and straightforward arguments as a type of communication. Duncombe declares that in spite of the Enlightenment, a period of history in the 17th and 18th centuries that made

⁵⁰⁴ Gottschall, xv, 56

⁵⁰⁵ Duncombe, 18

reasoning and rational thinking cultural priorities, humans still prefer appeals to come in the form of stories as opposed to what is often the complicated or “messy” truth.⁵⁰⁶

To sum up the arguments of the two preceding scholars, stories are influential to those who hear them, with the potential at times to be even more influential than other types of communication. One reason stories have the capacity to be more influential is that, as a culturally ubiquitous type of communication and form of entertainment, stories are better able to hold the attention of their audience.⁵⁰⁷ In terms of *The West Wing* specifically, Sorkin works to ensure that the viewing experience is above all else an emotional and sensory one. The show offers a sensory experience through the cadence of the dialogue written by Sorkin and delivered by actors. The rhythm of the lines as performed, whether their focus be witty banter between colleagues or governmental jargon spouted by bureaucrats, provide a satisfying aural experience for the audience. “The pace. The dialogue,” Yahoo! user Jessica posts when prompted to submit her favorite things about Sorkin’s writing. User Kel also mentions Sorkin’s dialogue, then adds, “The way [Sorkin] can bring the funny and the serious all in one ep[isode],” referring to the way Sorkin’s writing stirs feelings in the audience and simultaneously ties those feelings to the policies and politics that comprise the episode’s subject matter, allowing topics to resonate with viewers that might not otherwise. Message board member Pat describes the way Sorkin “makes me sit up and pay attention to what [the characters are] saying. I don’t want to miss a second because it’s so intelligent; the characters are so human. I just hate when the hour is over, because I have to wait a week

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 4-7

⁵⁰⁷ Lule, 3

to see more.”⁵⁰⁸ The following chapter explores some of the strategies Sorkin employs in order to produce an emotional and sensory experience, one that has the capability to distract from the overtness of any message the story may be communicating.⁵⁰⁹

Critics agree that *The West Wing* succeeds in making what are typically considered dry policy issues interesting, achieving what many – including Sorkin – thought was impossible. Lawrence O’Donnell admits, “I was absolutely convinced that [the show] didn’t have a chance... As far I could tell, in TV terms, nothing happened. It was a bunch of guys in neckties and some nicely dressed women who were arguing and nothing happened.”⁵¹⁰ But something was happening: audiences were connecting with the storylines and, more importantly, to the characters, rooting for them and hanging on their every word as they discuss arcane policy topics. Not only is Sorkin priming and framing issues for *The West Wing*’s viewers, he is also “translating” new or complex policy ideas, allowing a large audience to understand them and to organize the information about them that Sorkin provided.

Once again, the episode about the U.S. Census offers a perfect example. “I thought Aaron was crazy,” Allison Janney declares when she heard that her character, White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg, would be involved in a subplot involving the Census. “I was like, ‘Well, this is going to be the most boring thing ever.’”⁵¹¹ Sorkin himself concedes, “You just say the word ‘census’ and people fall asleep. It’s a

⁵⁰⁸ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/10150>, Jessica, 24 Oct 2001, Kel, 23 Oct 2001, Pat, October 26, 2001 (12:15 am); comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

⁵⁰⁹ Petty & Briñol, 53-54

⁵¹⁰ Justin

⁵¹¹ Aaron Sorkin, interview with Terence Smith

questionnaire; turns out it's terribly important."⁵¹² But the subplot manages to be entertaining, Schlamme argues, because their primary aim is not to teach, but to entertain:

You're involved with the fact that Sam is the smarter one [on this topic] and C.J. has to be the student at this moment, so you're enjoying that [as a viewer], first and foremost. The essence of the scene is not about teaching us about the census; it's about how are these two people going to end up being closer to one another by the end of this episode. So if you start from that, then you can lay on...any dialogue you want and it's fascinating.⁵¹³

The real White House took note of Sorkin's accomplishment at the time of the episode's airing. Joe Lockhart, then-Press Secretary to President Bill Clinton, commented on the episode in *Time* magazine: "Make the Census interesting, who'd have thought?"⁵¹⁴ And it is not merely the creative feat that was impressive to real-life political communicators; the size of the audience was as well. Bradley Whitford, who plays White House Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman, demonstrates the impact *The West Wing* had the potential to have: "When you do a show on the census, 13 million or 14 million people watch it all the way through. And somebody at the White House [told us], when we want to talk about something, if we get the news cycle, it's maybe a million people, and if we bring up the census, the channel changes." And so Sorkin, with that one story, was able to teach millions and millions of Americans about the importance of the U.S. Census, just months before the United States government was gearing up to conduct one.

In addition to making boring subjects interesting, Sorkin's stories are also able to make complicated subjects accessible and understandable – often more successfully than the news media, some think. Praise for how *The West Wing* presents political debates come from all corners of the federal government. Expanding on the way the show

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Miller

⁵¹⁴ Branegan

presented the issue of the U.S. Census, then-Press Secretary Lockhart declares that *The West Wing*, “did a better job of framing the issue, the politics on each side, and the passions on each side, than anybody in the broadcast world did throughout this debate.”⁵¹⁵ In 2000, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* quotes former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Robert Stutman as saying, “The most intelligent discussion I’ve heard among politicians concerning the drug issue...was on *The West Wing*, and it was President Josiah Bartlet.”⁵¹⁶ Patrick Cadell, a consultant for the show, was quoted in *Time* as saying that Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State for President Clinton, said a first-season episode on the India-Pakistan conflict (“Lord John Marbury”) “was one of the best expositions on foreign policy on TV that she’d seen.”⁵¹⁷

The *Cincinnati Enquirer* credits *The West Wing* with being able to sum up an international trade debate over European banana quotas “that lawyers and diplomats have spent nearly a decade trying to fully understand, yet alone resolve.” The *Enquirer* points out that while *Time* magazine took nine pages to one aspect of the dispute, Sorkin wrote a short scene that got to the heart of the issue in mere moments. Chief of Staff Leo McGarry explains to President Bartlet that the European quotas mean a limit to the business the United States does with poorer Latin American nations. Bartlet understands the bottom line immediately, responding simply, “So I’m in trouble with Chiquita and Dole?”⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁵ Aaron Sorkin, interview with Terence Smith

⁵¹⁶ Pennington

⁵¹⁷ Jay Branegan; “Lord John Marbury.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Patrick Caddell (teleplay), Patrick Caddell & Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. (story). Dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵¹⁸ Cliff Peale, “Bananas According to TV,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 13, 2000.

If *The West Wing* does a better job of informing its viewers about these political issues, it is not because the news cannot tell stories – journalism is as much about storytelling as television shows are – but because Sorkin tells a *better* story. Granted, television shows are able to combine fact and fiction in a way that news media may not always be able to.⁵¹⁹ In these and other ways to be explored below, *The West Wing*'s political subject matter reaches audiences using strategies that other forms of communication cannot always employ and gives voice to topics with which other forms struggle to frame and clearly explain. Sorkin makes the typically mundane machinations of governing both thrilling and inspiring.⁵²⁰ He excels at capitalizing on story's ability to, as Gottschall says, delight in order to instruct.⁵²¹

Reception of *The West Wing* Across the Ideological Spectrum

One of the ways we can measure the success of *The West Wing* as an example of storytelling that communicates a political message is how, regardless of the impression that it was a liberal-leaning show depicting a liberal administration promoting liberal causes, its viewership and indeed fan base includes those from every political stripe. The show boasted viewers and die-hard fans that self-identify as both liberal and conservative. Exit polling from the 2000 Presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore found that viewers of the show were split evenly between the candidates.⁵²² In 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* cited data from the Simmons Market Research Bureau showing viewers of *The West Wing* to be more political – whether conservative or liberal

⁵¹⁹ Crawley, 121

⁵²⁰ Saraiya

⁵²¹ Gottschall, 28

⁵²² Hayton, 77

– than the average television viewer, with respondents identifying themselves as both “somewhat liberal” and “somewhat conservative.” Granted, self-identifying “very conservative” viewers were less likely to watch the show, however the article offers one particularly interesting finding in the data: in the Los Angeles area, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to watch *The West Wing*.⁵²³

Posts from the Sorkin fan Yahoo! message board seem to bear out the finding that the show has fans from both ends of the ideological spectrum. Members of the Yahoo! group who consider themselves conservatives or Republicans, as well as fans who post on IMDB.com’s discussion forums, participate enthusiastically, stating that their own political preferences have no bearing on how much they enjoy the show or that they adore the show in spite of those preferences. They overwhelmingly cite the quality of both Sorkin’s writing and his characters as the reasons they watch *The West Wing*.⁵²⁴

⁵²³ Brian Lowry, “How High Can You Fly on a Left ‘Wing’? Viewers Cast Their Vote,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 2002. Accessed November 12, 2015.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/nov/13/entertainment/et-lowry13>

⁵²⁴ Jesse Jackson, September 14, 2001, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “As they used to say on Hill Street Blues,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, September 13, 2001,

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/7025>.; Jesse W. Jackson, August 7, 2002, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “OT - SUV Talk was Life Imitates Art Again,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, August 7, 2002,

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/22147>.; raging_hobo, April 20, 2014, (3:30 am), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1>

(Accessed June 9, 2014).; Dust_Indotex, May 14, 2014, (2:58 pm), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1> (Accessed June 9, 2014).; Steppy412, May 15, 2014, (8:55 pm), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1> (Accessed June 9, 2014).; cmbh123, May 31 2014; Joeishotterthantimberflake, April 25, 2014 (9:43 pm), comment on IMDb.com Message Boards, “Did West Wing Have Republican Fans?,” *The West Wing (1999)*, April 20, 2014,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/228639066?p=1> (Accessed June 9, 2014).; johnjms, Jun 2 2014; Ruthann, July 6, 2001, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “Questions from the UK,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, July 4, 2001,

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/5673>.; Kathy, November 27, 2002 (1:24 am), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “TWW is ‘liberal’ etc.,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, November 27, 2002, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/25696>.; Britt, October 23, 200, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”

Critics offer several theories as to why a television show about a Democratic American president pursuing mostly liberal policies would appeal to both Democrats and Republicans. Conservative viewers can admire the values of the characters in their pursuit of certain policies if not support the policies themselves.⁵²⁵ As Frank Luntz suggested, regardless of party, audience members can get swept up in the presentation and delivery of political ideas because Martin Sheen is so skilled at making President Bartlet's proclamation feel presidential.⁵²⁶ Sheen himself, when asked whether he thought *The West Wing* was able to reach viewers across party lines, replies:

Absolutely, yeah, I do indeed. I think it gave the American people a sense of pride and true patriotism. Because it didn't limit it to the party in power or to any particular political party. It expanded on all of the nameless heroes and heroines down through the beginning of the republic who continue to serve as a matter of pride and principle and of moral certitude.⁵²⁷

Josh Malina, who plays Will Bailey, offers his perspective on the political diversity of the audience: "I think, really, wherever you fell on the political spectrum...there was also something very seductive about at least positing a political world where most people cared deeply and were idealistic and were doing their job because they wanted to make the country a better place."⁵²⁸

Executive Producer John Wells sees the appeal across party lines as coming down to one simple explanation: "Whether you're a Republican or whether you're a Democrat, you hope for basic integrity and values in a president," which is what *The West Wing* offers.⁵²⁹ And no matter one's political affiliation, viewers of all types find themselves

⁵²⁵ Mataconis

⁵²⁶ Luntz

⁵²⁷ Cooper Allen, "15 Years Later: 'West Wing' Cast Members Reflect on Political Show," *USA Today*, October 13, 2014. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/10/13/west-wing-cast-martin-sheen-anniversary/16153423/>.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

attracted to the opportunity to pull back the curtain and see how complex the issues and staggering the hurdles can be for the people who attempt to govern a vast and diverse nation like America.⁵³⁰

Ultimately, though, this scholar proposes that it is through his reliance on several successful strategies that capitalize on his viewers' cultural relationship with storytelling that Sorkin is able to entertain and influence a politically-diverse audience. One of these strategies is the alignment of common American cultural values with the characters of *The West Wing*, and media critic Sophie Hollander agrees. Writing for *The American Prospect*, Hollander suggests that "The sincere commitment to creating a stronger, healthier democracy displayed by Bartlett and his senior staff – not to mention their effective melding of idealism and politics – resonated with *everyone's* better instincts," regardless of their party.⁵³¹

This dissertation purports that because of humans' cultural relationship to it, storytelling as a form of communication allows its practitioners to reach an audience in ways that other forms are not always able. The following section will dig deeper into this claim by contemplating some of the reasons for Sorkin's success in reaching and influencing a broad audience through storytelling and reviewing some of the related literature on the topic.

The Uniting Power of Stories

In the episode "Six Meetings Before Lunch," Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman is tasked with vetting a potential nominee to fill the position of Assistant Attorney

⁵³⁰ Lowry, Airworthy

⁵³¹ Just

General for Human Rights. As part of the process, it is discovered that the nominee, Jeff Breckenridge, is on the record for favoring reparations to African-Americans, and it is anticipated that several members of the Senate Judiciary Committee – which will have to approve the nomination – are going to have a problem with his position. A conversation between Josh and Jeff unfolds over three scenes in the episode. In true Sorkin style, their discussion is chock full of historical data and relevant statistics. But it is not an intellectual exercise for the two participants – it is an emotional one. As Josh asks Jeff to explain his position, Jeff offers the history of his ancestors that includes naming the specific village in which they were kidnapped, the location where they were taken to be sold, whom they were sold to, and where they worked as slaves when they arrived in America. Jeff immediately makes the issue very personal, taking it out of the abstract arena of politics and policies. When Josh tries to bring the conversation back into the abstract, Jeff resists, but as a lawyer and a civil rights expert, he has no problem supplying Josh with instances of historical precedent and related figures for his consideration. Josh is clearly not on board with the idea of slavery reparations, if for no other reason than that he believes them to be completely impractical, and he is also annoyed that he has been given the job of dealing with a nominee who has suddenly become controversial. His emotions provide cover for him to minimize Jeff's arguments about the wrongs done to American slaves and how they should be righted, which are otherwise difficult to dispute. Jeff demonstrates that he is not deterred by the practicality issue and has other suggestions for how the United States can repay the \$1.7 trillion he believes African-Americans are owed for the unpaid labor of their ancestors.

The debate between Josh and Jeff about slavery reparations does not actually get resolved in the episode, but the audience barely notices. What Sorkin does is very quickly and very subtly change the conversation. The third scene of this arc – and the final scene of the episode – crescendos with Josh becoming frustrated with Jeff to such a point that he brings up the somewhat unrelated fact that his grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, and then he becomes so flustered that he loses his train of thought altogether. Jeff, then humbly and benevolently, offers Josh a break and, in the case of the impending confirmation hearing, a lifeline. He asks Josh to take a dollar out of his wallet and look at it:

The seal, the pyramid, it's unfinished. With the eye of God looking over it. And the words *Annuit Coeptis*. He, God, Favors our Undertaking. The seal is meant to be unfinished, because this country's meant to be unfinished. We're meant to keep doing better. We're meant to keep discussing and debating and we're meant to read books by great historical scholars and then talk about them, which is why I lent my name to a dust cover. I want to be your Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. I'll do an outstanding job for all people in this country. You got any problem with me saying all that to the committee?

With this monologue, Jeff wins over the audience – and Josh – by invoking and celebrating a number of cultural values are considered to be at the core of America's national identity: progress, open debate, education, service, and freedom of speech.

Thus while Sorkin's writing, with its research and relevancy, makes *The West Wing* an intelligent show by industry standards, his stories are not intellectually-based. They are emotionally-based, and they are also culturally-based, relying on shared "American" values that resonate with the audience. In her assessment of the scene just described, Crawley describes the effect of Sorkin's tactic on the audience: "Reducing issues to simple metaphors leaves the audience with an emotional residue that outlasts the cognitive complexity a debate may have offered. Jeff's impassioned reading generates a

vision of the future that is connected to history and based on sentiment.”⁵³² The viewer is also grateful to Jeff because he lets Josh off the hook, saying he will play ball at the confirmation hearing. He will make Josh’s life a little easier and the viewer is happy about that because the viewer likes Josh and wants good things for him. Gottschall explains that audience members strongly empathize with the protagonists of a story, feeling the protagonist’s happiness, anxiety, and frustration.⁵³³ Dee Dee Myers sees the value in the relationship viewers have with the characters, stating that *The West Wing*’s power to teach is based on the way in which the characters are personally invested in the political process, and while the issues themselves may not be accessible, the audience’s connection to the characters is.⁵³⁴

At the end of that story arc, then, the audience is united behind the nomination of Jeff Breckenridge for Assistant Attorney General for Human Rights regardless of where each individual audience member stands on the issue of slavery reparations. This is one example of the uniting power of stories. Gottschall writes that stories are “a form of social glue that [bring] people together around common values.” And the beauty of the process is that humans are open to the experience of hearing stories – and therefore a story’s lesson – because the experience of hearing, reading, or watching a story is enjoyable. The experience of stories is an experience humans welcome, invite, and seek out, whereas that is not always the case with other types of communication that might feel more like lessons or lectures as opposed to entertainment. Stories allow the audience

⁵³² Crawley, 105

⁵³³ Gottschall, 67

⁵³⁴ Miller

to escape from feelings or to embrace vicarious feelings, and that is why humans are attracted to the lessons that stories can teach them.⁵³⁵

What are those lessons? *The West Wing*, like most television programming, offers viewers what communication scholar Larry Goss “a commonality of viewpoints and values.”⁵³⁶ According to Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles, the common perspectives offered by popular culture in general and by *The West Wing* in particular influence and mold “what it means to be an American” in the minds of the audience.⁵³⁷ *The West Wing* helps define what is “American,” makes these “American” values attractive to viewers, and triggers within viewers the cultural feelings they may have already held about the “American” values with which they had been previously familiar. Part of this result of having a diverse audience unite behind a character or a cause stems from a process that occurs whenever a person is on the receiving end of a narrative. Narratology scholar Seymour Chatman claims that part of the process of hearing, reading, or viewing a story is the requirement that each audience member respond with their own interpretation, even if it is just to fill in the gaps of the story that the teller believes will be assumed or that have gone unexplained for other reasons. Members of the audience, he posits, must participate in the “transaction” of storytelling – they cannot avoid it.⁵³⁸ By participating in the experience of watching *The West Wing*, audience members often feel united behind the characters and their storylines in spite of their differences, political or otherwise. The messy reality of viewers’ personal experiences and individual identities

⁵³⁵ Gottschall, 28, 57-58; for more on mirror neurons, see Gottschall, 60-1, 65

⁵³⁶ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 6

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 14-15

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 52; Chatman - p.28

are glossed over and minimized in the face of a few over-arching, bold-faced “values” to which many Americans can claim at least a loose relationship.

As the creator and writer of a popular fictional television show based on the political world, Sorkin is doing what Duncombe proposes progressive political operatives in America should be doing in his book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. Duncombe suggests that in order to shape public opinion, politicians should focus on “manipulating symbols, exploiting memories, and spinning stories.” In other words, he urges, ignore what was learned from the Enlightenment and target the irrational desires that make humans tick. Acknowledge and speak to their fantasies about life and the world they live in. Duncombe synthesizes succinctly what it is that makes a fictional television show like *The West Wing* an ideal conduit for the transmission of political messaging: “Reality needs fantasy to render it desirable, just as fantasy needs reality to make it believable.”

Sorkin is already doing what Duncombe is recommending real-life politicians do: wrap the truth up in stories; embed messaging into an experience that taps into a person’s hopes and dreams; and rely on myths and symbols that the audience finds meaningful in making a political point. Duncombe calls for “a propaganda of the truth.”⁵³⁹ Duncombe advises progressives to closer emulate the advertising world, which tends to be unabashed in its attempt to target their messaging to consumers’ desires and not their needs. “Advertising circumvents reason, working with the magical, the personal, and the associative,” he writes.⁵⁴⁰ What Duncombe is suggesting is that political practitioners meet people where they are, not where they think they should be. Sorkin gets this; he

⁵³⁹ Duncombe, 8-10, 19-20, 34

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 40, 79, 98

does not appear to be hung up on questions of whether he should be concerned with the means of a message. He seems interested solely in the ends: that his audience is moved by his story. He sees viewers where they are, that they do make decisions based on character judgments, and also that they are often prejudiced, something that will be addressed in the following chapter. In a famous moment from his film, *The American President*, Sorkin had his other fictional U.S. President, Andrew Shepherd, deliver the line, “Being president of this country is *entirely* about character.”⁵⁴¹

After all, voters often make decisions based on what they believe to be the personality characteristics of those running for election, and the perspective that such a basis is faulty only serves to limit the breadth of democratic deliberation.⁵⁴² Voters are not particularly concerned with delineating between the types of information they obtain about politicians and politics, and they are also not particularly concerned with delineating between the myriad ways they ingest this information. According to Jeffrey P. Jones, author of *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*, American citizens are accustomed to mixing information and entertainment in the same way they communicate and learn in their daily lives. Therefore the experience of watching *The West Wing*, wherein political information is enveloped within storytelling, is a familiar one. The chapter to follow will demonstrate the ways in which the storytelling on *The West Wing* capitalizes on this familiar experience in order to move and inspire its audience.

⁵⁴¹ *The American President*

⁵⁴² Parry-Giles, *Treacherous Piety*

“I love that [Sorkin] makes me laugh, he makes me cry, he makes me think. I can’t watch casually – I always know that something is going to grab either my heart or my head and most times, it’s both.”
Dena, Yahoo! Message Board⁵⁴³

CHAPTER FIVE

To watch *The West Wing*, according to both critics and fans, is to be inspired, feel hopeful, have one’s faith in humanity restored, be intellectually challenged, and be entertained.⁵⁴⁴ Many storytellers aspire to provoke the kind of enthusiastic reaction Sorkin provokes consistently with his storytelling on *The West Wing*, and many politicians would give anything to be able to communicate to an audience as large or as rapt. This chapter will review the specific narrative strategies that enable Sorkin to tell politically-divisive stories in a way that connects with a politically diverse audience. To begin, the focus of this section will be on two pieces of scholarship that offer more on the why and how of the claims being made about culture’s relationship with storytelling. The first is a book called *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, written by the aforementioned Jonathan Gottschall.

In *The Storytelling Animal*, Gottschall cites studies performed on the effects of fiction showing that fiction influences the development of morality and empathy in its readers’ brains.⁵⁴⁵ In other words, stories shape the belief systems of its audience.

Stories also unite an audience. Gottschall offers the reminder that until technology like

⁵⁴³ Dena, October 22, 2001 (8:32 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, October 22, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/topics/10089>.

⁵⁴⁴ Jesse, 23 Oct 2001, Jenny, 23 Oct 2001, Rhonda, 23 Oct 2001, Melissa, 22 Oct 2001, Christine, 23 Oct 2001, Britt, 23 Oct 2001, Jessica, 24 Oct 2001, Kel, 23 Oct 2001, Pat, 26 Oct 2001, comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”; John Magee, August 29, 2002, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “They Don’t Resonate,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, August 29, 2002, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/22624>.

⁵⁴⁵ Gottschall, 134-5, discusses how Dutch scholar Jemeljan Hakemulder reviewed dozens of scientific studies indicating that fiction has positive effects on readers’ moral development and sense of empathy

the printing press, the radio, and the television made it possible to enjoy stories individually, storytelling was often experienced in a communal setting. This can still be experienced in the movie theater, where Gottschall describes viewers reacting and responding to the story they are viewing “like a single organism:”

[Viewers] will flinch together, gasp together, roar with laughter together, choke up together. A film takes a motley association of strangers and syncs them up. It choreographs how they feel and what they think, how fast their hearts beat, how hard they breathe, and how much they perspire. A film melds minds. It imposes emotional and psychic unity.⁵⁴⁶

While uniting an audience emotionally, stories also reinforce a set of common cultural values. As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, stories indoctrinate a society’s youth, teaching them and reminding their elders what behaviors a culture considers to be good and to be bad. Stories encourage humans to strive to emulate the heroes they hear about and embody the values that those heroes exemplify. In this way, stories reduce conflict by encouraging a harmony of beliefs and conduct. Gottschall goes so far as to say that stories are “perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life.” Beyond kinship, he posits, stories are all that exist to connect “a society...composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas.”⁵⁴⁷

This is not to suggest that storytelling is the silver bullet of influence and impact. It is human nature to resist being manipulated, and some of what has been described above sounds like it borders on manipulation.⁵⁴⁸ However, some audience members seek stories out because they wish to be manipulated in a manner they presume to be safe, vicarious, and temporary. And storytelling still seems to have a leg up on other forms of communication in certain ways. As discussed previously, the message of a story is often

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 136

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 138

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 134, 137-8, 145

hidden within the plot. Gottschall likens this to a medicinal powder concealed within a tasty jam that humans are eager to swallow. And the better the story and the more it absorbs a person, research performed by Melanie Green and Timothy Brock shows, the more influence a story will have on his or her beliefs, and the less he or she is able to detect inaccuracies in the story.⁵⁴⁹

Where *The West Wing* is concerned, Sorkin gains access to loyal viewers not just through one story, but through a series of stories: he wrote 45 of the show's teleplays throughout the four seasons he was involved with the show.⁵⁵⁰ Gottschall points out that much of the research done on the effects of story is based on a small amount in a controlled setting, and even then participants can be influenced to change their way of thinking about topics ranging from race to sex to gender to ethical matters. Imagine how influential, then, stories are given their pervasiveness in our everyday lives.⁵⁵¹

The second body of scholarship to be considered is *Mr. Sorkin Goes to Washington*, by Melissa Crawley. While Crawley's work revolves specifically around how *The West Wing* depicts and informs America's cultural conception of the presidency, she also investigates how the show politically socializes its American audience by relying on and tapping into emotion, making the viewing of an episode an affective learning experience. Sorkin, she claims, capitalizes on the political socialization Americans have received as well as the emotions Americans link to their culturally-learned value systems. She explains that:

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 151

⁵⁵⁰ *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; *The West Wing: The Complete Second Season*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; *The West Wing: The Complete Third Season*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; *The West Wing: The Complete Fourth Season*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁵¹ Gottschall, 152-3

...the ‘culture’ of political socialization, previously constituted by the ‘separate symbolic practices’ of learned behaviors such as the pledge of allegiance and value systems based on feelings of loyalty and allegiance to democratic ideals, have been collated in *The West Wing*. The ‘generalized knowledge, aesthetic appreciation and meaning’ generated by the series has incorporated fundamental socialization processes, which allow viewers to build a structure of feeling toward the president.⁵⁵²

The presidency itself resonates as more than just the office. The presidency conjures for Americans conceptualizations of the government as a whole, the party in power, and all the lore and myths associated with those who have held the job.⁵⁵³

The emotions that are triggered by these political entities are attached by the viewer to characters and plot outcomes depicted on the show. Crawley acknowledges that cognition, affect, and ideology also play a role in an American’s formulation of the Presidency, but she argues that it is emotion that has the most influence: feeling and reasoning happen simultaneously, with emotional responses and learning enabling the ability to reason.⁵⁵⁴ If one’s construction of the presidency and all it entails is primarily an emotional one, what are the effects of this? What are the drawbacks? What parts of this process does Sorkin rely on, if any?

Crawley explains that to a majority of Americans, the president is emotionally constructed as a father figure, a moral leader, and an intellectual. Sorkin’s President Bartlet personifies these three components skillfully. He is a literal father figure to his three daughters, a figurative one to his staff, and a symbolic one to his constituency. He is a devout Catholic who relies on his religious identity to make decisions in his job. And

⁵⁵² Crawley, 12, 14, 30

⁵⁵³ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2-3, referencing Anne Norton

⁵⁵⁴ Crawley, 31, referencing Doris Graber

he is a Nobel-prize-winning economist. With Bartlet, Sorkin reaffirms the feelings about the Presidency already held by his viewers.⁵⁵⁵

Bartlet, then, along with his supportive staff, trigger the audience to recall a presidential schema that allows Sorkin to communicate in shorthand about related topics and plotlines. As discussed in the first chapter, schemas simplify meanings, which is helpful as humans can only process so much information at once. But schemas also encourage the support of previously held beliefs and the dismissal of new information that contradicts them.⁵⁵⁶ And a limitless range of meanings and arguments are not presented; the positions and ideas put forth are streamlined due to the pace constraints of the plot, and of course they are biased to the interests of the characters and the fictional Bartlet Administration. But, of course, that is where the story's message comes in.

Political communication scholar Roderick Hart contends that it is dangerous to encourage an audience to feel a certain way rather than think a certain way about politics because this distracts from and minimizes the importance of traditional political knowledge.⁵⁵⁷ An example of this playing out in *The West Wing* is a storyline from the episode "The Women of Qumar," wherein C.J. Cregg is distraught that the United States continues to supply arms to the fictional nation of Qumar, a Middle Eastern country notorious for its violent mistreatment of women. C.J. repeatedly allows her personal feelings about the country to shine through in a series of press briefings mentioning the arms deal. National Security Advisor Nancy McNally, also a woman and a racial minority, responds to C.J.'s questioning of their dealings with Qumar by listing the

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 33, 190

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 33, citing Buchanan; also on the topic Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 52

⁵⁵⁷ Roderick Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

practical reasons that America keeps a civil relationship with the draconian nation. Crawley boils it down in this manner: “C.J. represents compassion, empathy and humanitarian duty. Nancy is positioned as the cold, heartless representative of government.” She explains further that in Sorkin’s world, “A political decision is evaluated on affective terms—cynicism versus optimism, honesty versus manipulation.” Neither C.J. nor Nancy “win” the disagreement necessarily; the arms deal is already in place by the time it arrives on C.J.’s desk to be announced. But as the episode comes to a close, the emotional weight of C.J.’s argument lays more heavily on the viewer.⁵⁵⁸

Sorkin’s Narrative Strategies

As mentioned previously, Sorkin depends on four main strategies within his writing in order to simultaneously entertain and influence his politically-diverse audience. First, Sorkin constructs his characters to embody certain popular American values, enhancing their likeability. Second, he relies on the tried-and-true narrative structure of the hero’s quest, enhancing their relatability. Third, he frames political issues in such a way as to equate them for the audience to targeted cultural values. And fourth, he creates common enemies against which his heroes can fight, thus encouraging the audience to feel even more closely united with the characters. These four primary strategies will be outlined in the sections to follow.

⁵⁵⁸ “The Women of Qumar.” *The West Wing: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Felicia Wilson & Laura Glasser & Julia Dahl (Story). Dir. Alex Graves. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; Crawley, 91, 100

Characters' Embodiment of Values

In a discussion thread on the Internet Movie Database website, users are prompted to post one word to describe each of the show's main characters. Words that appeared repeatedly in the responses are traits considered to be culturally positive: loyal, just, reliable, idealistic, faithful, dedicated, inspiring, caring, tenacious, persistent, and leader.⁵⁵⁹ One of the reasons *The West Wing* has a fan base that encompasses both politically conservative and liberal viewers is that viewers are compelled to root for the show's characters because they are written to embody certain cultural values like the ones mentioned, as opposed to political "values" that can be divisive.

As Sorkin's storytelling inspires his audience members to root for the characters, they must also root for the characters to successfully achieve their aims, which often include the enactment of traditionally progressive political issues. Yahoo! user John Magee describes this phenomenon in one of his message board posts: "Almost every first season episode brought an emotional response[,] from when mr willis [sic] talked to toby I cried[,] when josh told the senator to shove his legislative agenda I stood on my bed and cheered."⁵⁶⁰ On some level, it is as simple as making the characters of Josh, Sam, C.J., Toby, and all the rest of them likeable. Viewers like the characters on *The West Wing*. Yahoo! user Paulette explains, "I love how [Sorkin] combines idealism and humanity all at once and makes us care about his characters, foibles and all."⁵⁶¹ Message board member Jessica states that Sorkin "makes it possible for you to disagree with a character

⁵⁵⁹ IMDb.com Message Boards, "If you could describe in ONE word the main characters..." *The West Wing* (1999), November 3, 2013, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/board/flat/221680602?p=1> (Accessed June 15, 2014).

⁵⁶⁰ John Magee

⁵⁶¹ Paulette, October 23, 2001 (12:39 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, "New Group Questionnaire," *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, October 22, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/topics/10089>.

on any given issue, but [you] don't (at least I don't) lose any affection or respect for them. They're human."⁵⁶² Some viewers even see themselves in the characters, as in the case of Yahoo! user Seamus, who posts, "I am so much like some of his characters that it is scary."⁵⁶³

Once these opinions of the characters are formed, the political issues that the characters fight for become the backdrop within Sorkin's stories.⁵⁶⁴ And because the viewers have faith in the characters' intentions – part of Sorkin's signature style is that he never fails to portray them as unfailingly upstanding – viewers allow themselves to be more flexible in terms of how much they align with the characters' political goals. This is not unlike how voters judge politicians. While perhaps the gold standard in a democracy is that citizens are informed and make political decisions based on issues, the reality is that voters often make judgements based on the character of political candidates.⁵⁶⁵

Viewers of *The West Wing* are more willing to believe in the aims of the characters as laid out in Sorkin's stories because they believe the best of the characters. This is in strong juxtaposition to "real" politicians, about whom constituents tend to believe and expect the worst.⁵⁶⁶ One knock against politicians is that they are most motivated to do things for the benefit of improving their image. Sorkin demonstrates over and over again throughout the show that this is not what motivates his characters.

⁵⁶² Jessica, 22 Oct 2001

⁵⁶³ Seamus, October 23, 2001 (10:15 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, "New Group Questionnaire," *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, October 22, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/topics/10089>.

⁵⁶⁴ Crawley, 105-106

⁵⁶⁵ Michael Calvin McGee, "'Not Men, But Measures': The Origins and Import of an Ideological Principle," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (April 1974).

⁵⁶⁶ "Congress and the Public," Gallup, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>.

For instance, the very first scene of the pilot shows Sam Seaborn waking up having spent the night with a woman he barely knows. As the episode unfolds, Sam and the audience learn that the woman is, in addition to being a law student, a call girl.⁵⁶⁷ Over the course of the next several episodes, as Sam's colleagues learn of the relationship and worry that the press will find out as well, Sam defends the friendship he forges with the woman – who is framed, somewhat dubiously, as a hard worker who is trying to better herself by putting herself through school the only way she knows how – and resists dismissing her simply because their association does not “look” good.⁵⁶⁸ Through this storyline, Sorkin demonstrates that his characters of *The West Wing* are self-aware about their devotion to what is right.

This is the single-most prevalent characteristic of Sorkin's characters: they are always trying to do the right thing. A majority of Sorkin's storylines reflect the characters' morality. Sorkin provides his characters with ample opportunities to be morally superior, which not only frames them as “good” and entices viewers to root for their aims, but taps into American viewers' belief in their country's exceptionalism. Americans can *act* better because they *are* better. Yahoo! user Heather posts that Sorkin “manages to convey all the layers of the modern experience without losing his idealism or his faith in our ability to *be good*...”⁵⁶⁹

The characters within Sorkin's stories are shown to exercise several morally superior traits: being honest and not hypocritical, believing that the means are important and are not always justified by the ends, and possessing a distaste for politics. The

⁵⁶⁷ “Pilot”

⁵⁶⁸ For more on this, see Crawley, 7

⁵⁶⁹ Heather, October 22, 2001 (9:39 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, October 22, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/topics/10089>.

characters also demonstrate a belief that their moral superiority will allow them to prevail because good intentions trump all. For Yahoo! user Ruthann, this is what allows her to put her personal politics aside to enjoy the show: “I’m a republican (sic), so I don’t always agree with the politics of the show, but I love that the characters are fighting so hard for what they believe in and doing it because they think it’s right.”⁵⁷⁰ Writing for *Emmy* magazine, Tad Bartimus expresses his belief that this is one of the primary attributes that draws viewers to the show: “West Wingers believe in a higher calling, something not much in evidence elsewhere these days. Sure, their egos are fully inflated, but never mind. In a TV world increasingly populated by scumbags, white collar and otherwise, we’re hungry for ethical markers; every week *The West Wing* delivers them...”⁵⁷¹

In episode eleven, “Lord John Marbury,” Sorkin presents a storyline in which C.J., the White House press secretary, is purposefully kept out of the loop on military movements between India and Pakistan, which puts her in the position of unknowingly lying to the press.⁵⁷² The lesson for her colleagues in the end is that anything less than total honesty is unacceptable and, in this case wherein it results in a misleading of the press, it is un-American. In two other episodes, Sorkin highlights instances in which his characters are concerned with hypocrisy. In the fifth episode, “The Crackpots and These Women,” Toby and President Bartlet have a conversation about violence in American movies wherein Toby is insistent that if the Administration is to take a position on the topic, it does so for the right reasons and without taking fundraising money from the very

⁵⁷⁰ Ruthann, 6 Jul 2001

⁵⁷¹ Bartimus

⁵⁷² “Lord John Marbury”

people they are criticizing.⁵⁷³ In episode sixteen, “20 Hours in L.A.,” it is determined that Vice President Hoynes may need to be asked to break the tie in the Senate’s vote on the ethanol tax, which would require Hoynes to vote in a way that has been inconsistent with his record on the issue. Sam and Leo tell the President that they believe it is wrong to ask Hoynes to do so, and in the end it is decided that they will lose the vote in order to let Hoynes off the hook.⁵⁷⁴

These examples of Sorkin portraying the characters within *The West Wing*’s stories as honest and not hypocritical allow him to cover political issues on the show without having the issues themselves or the issue outcomes be the lesson his characters – and his viewers – learn. They also contribute to the characters’ exploration of the question of means versus ends, which is another repeated focus of Sorkin’s. The tensions that underlie the plotlines dealing with the question of whether means justify the ends really surround the question of whether it is important to maintain standards of decency no matter what. In episode ten, “In Excelsis Deo,” Sam and Josh flirt with taking the low road in their determination to defend Leo from Congressional Republicans who want to attack his past as an addict. Leo reminds them that they are better than that, saying, “We don’t do these things,” in response to Josh’s suggestion that they try and get some information from Sam’s call girl friend Laurie about clients who may be involved with the main aggressor, Congressman Lillienfield. When Sam and Josh defy Leo and

⁵⁷³ “The Crackpots”

⁵⁷⁴ “20 Hours in L.A.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

approach Laurie to ask her for incriminating information, she too rebukes them, saying, “You’re the good guys, you should act like it.”⁵⁷⁵

In episode fifteen, “Celestial Navigation,” the question of means versus ends is challenged when Supreme Court nominee Mendoza is arrested and locked up as a result of racial profiling. Toby and Sam come to get Mendoza released, but Mendoza insists that he does not want to receive special treatment – that he should experience due process as any citizen would, regardless of the fact that he was jailed for the wrong reason in the first place. Toby, however, stresses that Mendoza needs to accept special treatment in this case so that he can go on to capitalize on the opportunity he is being given to help people who would never be granted special treatment in a similar situation.⁵⁷⁶ The question of means versus ends is challenged again in the following episode, “20 Hours in L.A.,” when Hollywood mogul Ted Marcus wants the President to publicly denounce a bill banning gays in the military that has been introduced in the House by a powerless instigator in exchange for the fundraising dollars Marcus can bring him. Bartlet manages to successfully convince Marcus this is a bad idea – that in spite of the virtue of taking a stand in many situations, in this instance it will only result in an eccentric legislator getting attention for a piece of legislation that will otherwise never see the light of day.⁵⁷⁷ With these storylines, Sorkin is supporting at some points, and eschewing at others, that which Duncombe suggests progressives should abandon, which is “the insistence that the purpose (and pleasure) of politics lies in the means as much as the ends.”⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁵ “In Excelsis Deo.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Rick Cleveland. Dir. Alex Graves. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁷⁶ “Celestial Navigation.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Dee Dee Myers & Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. (Story). Dir. Christopher Misiano. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁷⁷ “20 Hours in L.A.”

⁵⁷⁸ Duncombe, 70

Another consistent theme on exhibit in Sorkin's storylines is that of the characters' distaste for the gamesmanship of politics, which plays well with an American audience and offers them yet another way in which they can identify with and root for the characters, no matter what political issue is at hand.⁵⁷⁹ From the very first episode, wherein Josh is not fired for insulting the religious right even though it would have pacified the leadership of a large voter base, Sorkin's characters choose doing the right thing over doing what is most politically expedient in terms of winning the game of politics.⁵⁸⁰ Sam tries to make the same argument in episode three when he defends his burgeoning friendship with Laurie the call girl, portraying his pursuing the friendship as the *right* choice in contrast to ceasing all contact with her as the politically expedient choice. In this case, C.J. is put in a difficult position because her ability to support a situation based solely on whether it is *right* is pit against her duty to protect the President, which requires her to care about how something will make him "look."⁵⁸¹ In episode thirteen, "Take Out the Trash Day," when Lowell Lydell's father ruffles feathers with his opinion that Bartlet is not doing enough to promote gay rights, C.J.'s instinct is to let him stay for the signing of the hate crimes bill and let him have his say, however she is pressured by Mandy and reporter Danny Concannon to be "professional" and prioritize her protection of the President's image.⁵⁸²

The question of whether to allow considerations of the game of politics to dictate policy decisions is at the heart of episode fourteen, "Take This Sabbath Day," wherein

⁵⁷⁹ For more on Bartlet as being an antipolitical president, see Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 50

⁵⁸⁰ Crawley, 82; "Pilot"

⁵⁸¹ "A Proportional Response." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Marc Buckland. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁸² "Take Out the Trash Day." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Ken Olin. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Bartlet must decide whether to stay a federal execution. The story is about Bartlet making the wrong decision and doing it for politically expedient reasons, and ultimately the price he pays is a moral one that weighs on his conscience.⁵⁸³ The staffers make a better, apolitical decision in episode eighteen, “Six Meetings Before Lunch,” where Leo and Josh trust their nominee for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights to explain his position on slavery reparations rather than immediately withdrawing his nomination for political reasons.⁵⁸⁴ At points, Sorkin shows his characters to be weary of even private, verbal acknowledgements of political gamesmanship, such as in “What Kind of Day Has It Been” when Leo scolds Josh for saying that if the American pilot who has gone missing in the Iraqi no-fly zone is rescued and brought back alive, the President will get a ten-point bump in the polls. Leo is shocked Josh would say such a thing, telling him, “There’s a way to be a person.”⁵⁸⁵

In the end, Sorkin’s stories are comprised of characters who are devoted to the concept of making morally superior decisions because, in their storylines, good intentions tend to trump all. Even when Josh and Sam come dangerously close to using political dirty tricks to embarrass Lillienfield, Sorkin makes sure to emphasize that they were considering it only in loyalty to their boss and friend.⁵⁸⁶ In other words, they were planning to do the wrong thing for all the right reasons. They remain selfless and unambitious.⁵⁸⁷ In episode ten, “In Excelsis Deo,” Toby name-drops the President in

⁵⁸³ “Take This Sabbath Day.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay), Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. & Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin (story). Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁸⁴ “Six Meetings Before Lunch.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Clark Johnson. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁸⁵ “What Kind of Day Has It Been.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁵⁸⁶ “In Excelsis Deo”

⁵⁸⁷ For more on the noble causes of the Bartlet staff, see Crawley, 81

order to get a military funeral arranged for the homeless veteran who died. Mrs. Landingham ensures that Toby knows that he overstepped his bounds, but demonstrates her approval that he did it for a noble cause by attending the burial with him.⁵⁸⁸ In “Lord John Marbury,” Sam drafts a statement for the President to make in support of Leo against direct orders in case his history as an addict comes to light. Sam defends himself, showing little remorse: “I disobeyed you and I apologize. But that’s the way it is.”⁵⁸⁹ In all of the preceding examples, good intentions trump disobedience, and the characters evade any repercussions.

In the world of politics, where doing the right thing is not assumed to be high on the list of priorities for politicians, Sorkin makes eschewing gamesmanship and politics-as-usual the rebellious stance within his stories. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Sorkin explains, “Our leaders are always portrayed as Machiavellian or dolts, so I thought I’d write about government leaders who are trying to do the right thing but who fail sometimes.”⁵⁹⁰ The characters represent what Americans hope are the type of people who work in the White House: people with a sense of morality and duty, a vision of the greater good, as well as – in the words of journalist Sonia Saraiya – a “strong and almost pathological sense of public service.”⁵⁹¹ In episode eight, “Enemies,” Bartlet himself describes one of the job requirements of a White House staffer as having “a commitment to a common and higher purpose.”

The pilot episode sets up the viewer’s conception of the main characters as stand-up men and women worth rooting for. Josh has done something both *right and* politically

⁵⁸⁸ “In Excelsis Deo”

⁵⁸⁹ “Lord John Marbury”

⁵⁹⁰ Lynette Rice, “The Political Party,” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 11, 2006.

⁵⁹¹ Saraiya; For more: Burkeman; McMillan; “Good Lessons From the Tube”

unforgivable, yet his colleagues, who have risen to the highest place their career in American politics could take them and therefore have the most to lose, stick up for him, defend him, and protect him in spite of political expediency. As part of the same plot, they thumb their noses at the hypocrisy of those who use religion for personal gain. In this case, the use of religion is framed as abuse of religion as the leaders are shown not only to lack a basic knowledge of the Ten Commandments, but to be condoning by silence the use of religion as justification for heartless, terrorizing acts, like sending a child a stabbed doll in the mail.⁵⁹² Josh becomes a hero to the audience by demonstrating both conviction and humility, showing himself to be extraordinarily talented yet also quite human and fallible. Interestingly, this sets the tone for Bradley Whitford, who plays Josh, to become a fan favorite and possibly the most integral part of the show, despite the fact that at the outset he was not its biggest star.

In several instances, Sorkin demonstrates that the characters within his stories will always choose being good over looking good. As part of the story arc involving Sam and the call girl, named Laurie, Sam defends himself in a heated conversation with Josh about continuing to be a supportive friend to Laurie, insisting that the course of action he is taking *is* the right way to handle the situation, whereas abandoning a new friend because of her chosen profession would be callous:

SAM: “I know the difference between right and wrong!”

JOSH: “It’s not like you didn’t know you were going to be held to a higher standard when you took this job.”

SAM: “I don’t mind being held to a higher standard, I mind being held to a lower one.”⁵⁹³

⁵⁹² “Pilot”

⁵⁹³ “A Proportional Response”

And whether or not they are right in the end, their intentions are always good. In the pilot, the audience sees the staff discuss a situation in which 1200 Cuban refugees on unreliable rafts are making their way to Florida just as severe weather is due to hit.⁵⁹⁴ They consider this sticky political issue, immigration, looking at it from several angles. In the end they unite on one priority: helping their fellow man. In other words, politics eschewed in favor of “doing the right thing,” a theme revisited again and again by Sorkin within his storytelling.

Similarly, in the third episode, “A Proportional Response,” Josh is interested in hiring a personal assistant, or body man, for President Bartlet. Josh poses the question to Leo about whether the fact that Charlie is African-American might create a bad “visual” when he is shown carrying the President’s bags and holding the door open for him. Leo’s response is that the question itself and caring about the answer are both ridiculous: “Josh, I hold the door open for the president and it’s an honor. This is serious business, this isn’t casting, we get the guy for the job and we take it from there.” Josh is pleased with the answer. Later, Leo gut-checks his initial response to Josh by asking the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Percy Fitzwallace, his opinion. He, too, has little patience for the question of aesthetics: “I’m an OLD black man and I wait on the president!” In signature Sorkin style, Fitzwallace does not leave it at that. He follows up with a lesson on what the important questions should be to anyone looking to hire a person: “You’re gonna pay him a decent wage? You’re gonna treat him with respect in the workplace? Then why the hell should I care? I got some real honest-to-god battles to fight, Leo. I ain’t got time for the cosmetic ones.”⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁴ “Pilot”

⁵⁹⁵ “A Proportional Response”

Other cultural values embodied by the characters on *The West Wing* are those of duty and loyalty. The characters take their duty to serve the President and their loyalty to country, their government, and especially their colleagues extremely seriously. They will do things they find distasteful and stand by them if it means serving their President, as Sam does when he writes a position paper on school vouchers despite his belief in the public school system in “Six Meetings Before Lunch.” Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles point out that staff members verbally pledge their devotion to President Bartlet as a matter of routine on the show.⁵⁹⁶ In “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” C.J., Josh, Sam, and Toby gather with Leo in his office and each declare, in turn, “I serve at the pleasure of the president.”⁵⁹⁷

In *The West Wing*, Josh is the character that displays the fiercest conception of loyalty. It is emphasized repeatedly throughout the first season as Sorkin develops his character. In the sixth episode, “Mr. Willis of Ohio,” Josh receives a card from the National Security Council with directions to a bunker in case of nuclear attack. He receives it because he is Bartlet’s Deputy Chief of Staff. He soon realizes that his colleagues’ job roles have not warranted them the same protection in such an event and so he decides he cannot stomach receiving such a privilege if his friends and teammates do not. Sorkin reveals that this taps into Josh’s guilt over fleeing the burning childhood home in which his sister would perish.⁵⁹⁸

In later episodes of the first season, Josh demonstrates his loyalty further, particularly in relation to his boss, Leo, who is under attack from Congressional Republicans who wish to humiliate him by exposing him as a former addict. Josh tells

⁵⁹⁶ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 152

⁵⁹⁷ “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”

⁵⁹⁸ “Mr. Willis of Ohio.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Christopher Misiano. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Leo, “You’re not going to be taken down by this small fraction of a man. I won’t permit it.” Leo advises Josh not to go to bat for him, but Josh is undeterred. Later, Leo informs Bartlet that this attack is coming Leo’s way, and Bartlet tells Leo that Josh is “smart” for being loyal to him.⁵⁹⁹ In “Lord John Marbury,” Josh verbally roughs up a man who has deposed him under the guise of “drug use in the White House” in order to discuss discover more dirt on Leo. Josh is specifically riled when the interviewer exclaims that he cannot understand why Josh and Sam, who is there as Josh’s legal representation, would stand up for Leo.⁶⁰⁰

In episodes 19 and 20, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet” and “Mandatory Minimums,” the audience sees what happens when loyalty does not endure. It is discovered that a member of the press has gotten hold of a memo detailing the weaknesses of the Bartlet administration. Mandy, a political consultant who worked on Bartlet’s presidential campaign and rejoined the staff after Bartlet had been in office for about a year, confesses that she is its author and that she had written it between the time she worked for Bartlet’s campaign and returned to his employ in the White House. The result is that she is excluded from key meetings by her colleagues and is ultimately shut out altogether.⁶⁰¹ She does not return for season two. The lesson Sorkin reveals here within his storytelling is that, for the characters on the show, loyalty is about more than just who signs your paycheck. It is deep-seated and transcends time and employment status. Time off does not equal a suspension of loyalty.

⁵⁹⁹ “The Short List.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Patrick Caddell (teleplay) and Aaron Sorkin & Dee Dee Myers (Story). Dir. Bill D’Elia. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁶⁰⁰ “Lord John Marbury”

⁶⁰¹ “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”; “Mandatory Minimums.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Robert Berlinger. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Sorkin makes it easy for the president's staff to be loyal to him, because Bartlet is shown in all instances within Sorkin's stories to be a good person and a strong leader. Lawrence O'Donnell, one of the writers on the show, pronounces Bartlet first and foremost to be "a good and decent person."⁶⁰² Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles describe Bartlet as an "intellectually gifted, committed honest presidential hero" with "political values associated with a selfless search for morality and justice."⁶⁰³ Joyce Millman, a television critic, sums Bartlet up as a leader who is "all principle, compassion and new England vigor."⁶⁰⁴ Bartlet's character was originally supposed to only amount to a cameo appearance now and then in Sorkin's original conception of the show, but Martin Sheen did such an excellent job playing the part of a president for whom viewers would be ecstatic to vote that he quickly became one of the main characters of the show.⁶⁰⁵

While many things about Bartlet seem extraordinary to the point of being other-worldly, Sorkin's stories often depict Bartlet as someone who connects with the common man. In the second episode, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc," the audience sees Bartlet as both an exceptionally smart and funny person. Meanwhile, his interactions with a young military doctor, Captain Morris Tolliver, demonstrate that despite his rank, Bartlet does not consider himself too good to interact and develop a rapport with the *little people*. It is also learned that, in spite of his position as Commander-in-Chief, Bartlet is, quite humanly, still intimidated by flag officers in the military.⁶⁰⁶ This shows the audience that not only can he connect with the common man, but he *is* a common man with some

⁶⁰² Scott D. Pierce, "Term Limits," *Deseret Morning News*, May 12, 2006.

⁶⁰³ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 31, 32, 63

⁶⁰⁴ Joyce Millman, "...But I Play One on TV," *Salon.com*, November 1, 1999. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.salon.com/1999/11/01/westwing/>.

⁶⁰⁵ Lynch

⁶⁰⁶ "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

human frailty. At the episode's conclusion, when Bartlet proclaims that he yearns to seek retribution for the death of Captain Tolliver (and new father of ten days), Sorkin's storytelling conveys that Bartlet is moved by emotion and holds as important each and every American life. In later episodes, Bartlet is shown introducing himself to the stenographer in a meeting of the Cabinet and also talking on the phone to a young seaman on a Navy maintenance and supply boat who is caught in a storm and scared for his life. Bartlet physically gets down on his knees to talk to him, telling the seaman that he will stay on the phone with him through the storm.⁶⁰⁷

There are so many celebrated cultural values exemplified by the characters within Sorkin's storytelling on *The West Wing*. In "In Excelsis Deo," Toby exhibits charity and compassion when a coat he has donated to Goodwill ends up on the back of a homeless Vietnam veteran who dies in his sleep on a park bench. Mrs. Landingham, the president's chief secretary, exhibits sacrifice as she shares her loss of two sons to the war in Vietnam and later attends the funeral of the homeless veteran alongside Toby.⁶⁰⁸ In "Take Out the Trash Day," Leo exhibits the value of forgiveness as he offers not immediate termination but a second chance to the young staffer who leaked his personnel records revealing his past battles with addiction.⁶⁰⁹ In "Take This Sabbath Day," President Bartlet exemplifies the value of taking personal responsibility when he chooses not to commute the sentence of a criminal who is set to receive capital punishment because it is not politically expedient. Bartlet feels remorse and guilt and invites his

⁶⁰⁷ "The State Dinner." *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Paul Redford. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.; "Enemies"

⁶⁰⁸ "In Excelsis Deo"

⁶⁰⁹ "Take Out the Trash Day"

childhood priest into the Oval Office to hear his confession.⁶¹⁰ In “A Proportional Response,” Charlie exhibits the value of being unambitious as he resists being considered for the position of personal aide to the President when he had only applied for a messenger job.⁶¹¹ Crawley explains why Americans are leery of ambition, positing that the very origins of America as a politically-independent entity were rooted in the colonists’ disillusionment with and distrust of power-hungry men.⁶¹²

While doing the *right* thing is always a priority for Sorkin’s characters, sometimes there are complicating factors within Sorkin’s storytelling that make the high road difficult to determine. Sometimes there are two ways that could each be considered the *right* choice. For instance, in “Enemies,” the staffers realize that a banking reform bill they have championed is within reach of passing and coming to the White House for the president’s signature. At the eleventh hour, Congressional Republicans attempt to attach a land-use rider to the bill that would strip mine Big Sky Federal Reserve. There are two ways to be *right* in the scenario set up by Sorkin’s story: pass the bill with the land-use rider, because even though it is a loss in the sense that certain environmental protections are stripped in one area of Montana, the greater win is that the entire banking industry is reformed; or veto the entire bill in order to kill the legislative “poison pill” that would destroy Big Sky. Josh says they should veto the entire bill, while Sam says that the banking bill is “the ball game” and they should not get distracted by one small environmental defeat. In the end, Bartlet wins both battles when Josh has the idea to invoke the Antiquities Act and have the president declare Big Sky a national park.⁶¹³

⁶¹⁰ “Take This Sabbath Day”

⁶¹¹ “A Proportional Response”

⁶¹² Crawley, 9

⁶¹³ “Enemies”

In a later episode, “The White House Pro-Am,” a storyline features First Lady Abbey Bartlet making public statements about child-labor abuse abroad and inspiring the introduction of a poison pill that threatens to derail an international tariff bill championed by the President. While she has “failed” in doing the right thing of honoring the office of the Presidency and supporting her President’s goals, she is doing the right thing in the minds of the audience by putting politics aside in order to try to help those who are the victims of child slave labor. The First Lady does not hesitate to take her husband to task for questioning her statements: “If it was one of our [daughters] in that factory, you’d send in the Marines.”⁶¹⁴ While it may seem dull to think that Sorkin consistently has his characters making the same choice – whichever choice is most *right* – the elements of surprise and conflict still arise with regularity, not only because what is right is not always possible, but also because what is *most* right can be very difficult for the characters on *The West Wing* to determine.

In this section, an array of examples has been provided to demonstrate how the characters within Sorkin’s stories reflect and embody the cultural values Americans are taught to revere: idealism, moral purpose, compassion, loyalty, and persistence being a few. Sorkin has created the characters on *The West Wing* to be respectable, and viewer’s respect for a character has the potential to translate into respect for the character’s cause, even if an ideological conflict exists between the cause and the viewer. The next section will illuminate Sorkin’s use of the Hero’s Quest, another of Sorkin’s strategies for connecting with and uniting an ideologically diverse audience.

⁶¹⁴ “The White House Pro-Am.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. & Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Ken Olin. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Sorkin's Use of the Hero's Quest

There is something beyond the audience liking the characters and wanting things to work out for them taking place in Sorkin's stories. There is also a familiar narrative structure at play that cues the audience to expect a certain successful conclusion for Leo, Josh, C.J., Toby, Sam, and the President. Viewers are concerned for the characters and want them to get what they deserve, which – as “good” people – is a happy ending, an attainment of goals.⁶¹⁵ Because humans are steeped in stories from birth, they understand subconsciously the concepts of what narratologist Walter Fisher calls narrative fidelity and coherence.⁶¹⁶ Narrative coherence is whether a story unfolds as viewers expect it to and narrative fidelity is whether a story feels true and reliable. Viewers continually test for narrative fidelity and coherence throughout the storytelling experience. If a plot twist does not feel right to them, they will notice and think, “That’s not what was supposed to happen.” This is because stories tend to adhere to a specific structure known as the Hero's Quest, of which humans are culturally aware, if only subconsciously.

Briefly, the Hero's Quest is a narrative structure that involves a protagonist or protagonists facing struggles and trials in pursuit of a goal. The story begins with an Inciting Incident that takes the hero outside his or her balanced world and presents a goal that will return the hero's life back to balance. The goal presents a challenge and obstacles, or forces of antagonism, will be faced in order to achieve it. Once these things are defined, the audience will automatically relate to, and root for, the hero. Robert McKee, an author and screenwriting consultant, explains why this is the case, stating that the audience seeks the *Center of Good* – or evidence of what is positive within humanity.

⁶¹⁵ Gottschall, 131

⁶¹⁶ Fisher, 47

“Once finding this core, emotions flow to it. The reason we search for the Center of Good is that each of us believes that we are good or right and want to identify with the positive.” The Center of Good must be located within the protagonist. In other words, it is part of human nature to identify with the good guys, and the hero is always one of the good guys.⁶¹⁷

The characters of *The West Wing* are no exception. Sorkin presents them as heroes on a quest to fight for the betterment of America through the promotion of progressive values.⁶¹⁸ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles observe that *The West Wing* “captures the romantic appeal of its presidential character and the collective heroism of his White House – watching them try to fix everything, pursuing their quest for justice, as they face the extraordinary challenges of contemporary life and the internal doubts that face us all.”⁶¹⁹ It is convenient, actually, that President Bartlet is a Democrat, as Democrats claim to be the political party that helps the “little guy,” whether that be poor Americans, working class Americans, or minority and underrepresented Americans. Protecting the underdog is considered to be a heroic act in American culture. As Bradley Whitford contends, “People respond to progressive Democrats. It’s more heroic to fight for civil rights legislation than a tax cut.”⁶²⁰ This section will offer three ways in which Sorkin writes storylines for his characters that emulate key parts of the Hero’s Quest. They include stacking the odds against the characters in their attempt to do good; keeping his heroes humble; and correcting for the heroes’ flaws.

⁶¹⁷ Lule, 88; Campbell, 81; R. McKee, 192, 258, 347, 375

⁶¹⁸ For more on how the characters are heroic figures on a romantic narrative journey, see Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 23-5

⁶¹⁹ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 32

⁶²⁰ Sharon Waxman, “Inside *The West Wing*’s New World,” *George* magazine, November 2000.; for more on this Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 50

By writing storylines that stack the odds against his characters, Sorkin is putting his heroes up a metaphorical tree. In the first season of *The West Wing*, there are several subplots wherein the game of politics becomes an obstacle for the characters in whichever battle Sorkin has them fighting. One glaring example is the situation with Sam and Laurie, the call girl. Sam wants to pursue a friendship with and offer support to Laurie while all the staffers around him advise him that it is inadvisable.⁶²¹ Another example occurs within episode seven, “The State Dinner.” Upon learning that terrorists have shot down an aircraft with Americans in it, Bartlet’s reaction is that he does not want to play the game as it is always played. He does not want to respond with what his military advisors suggest: a proportional response. He wants to obliterate the enemy and send a message that this is what happens when you place Americans in harm’s way. However, his advisors pose an obstacle – while they cannot overrule the Commander-in-Chief, they can present with great emphasis all the downsides of the kind of military action Bartlet is proposing.⁶²² In episode nine, “The Short List,” the obstacles the President faces are named by Bartlet himself during a conversation he has with retiring Supreme Court Justice Joseph Crouch. Crouch expresses his disappointment with what little Bartlet has done with his presidency in the time he has been in office, saying that Bartlet’s campaign raised expectations because it was “an insurgency, boy, a sight to see,” but that in office Bartlet has been gutless. Bartlet heatedly retorts that he is up against an opposition Congress, special interests, and a bitchy media – serious obstacles, to be sure.⁶²³

⁶²¹ “A Proportional Response”

⁶²² “The State Dinner”

⁶²³ “The Short List”

Sorkin goes further at times to keep his heroes humble. Once up the tree, he throws rocks at them. Several subplots in episode seven, “The State Dinner,” exhibit this tactic resulting in Toby, Mandy, and President Bartlet each feeling thoroughly humbled by the episode’s end. In one storyline, Toby prioritizes honesty over political niceties in the toast he writes for President Bartlet to give during the State dinner with the Indonesian Prime Minister. Later, when Toby asks a favor of his counterpart in the Indonesian government on behalf of a friend of Toby’s who is imprisoned there, the foreign bureaucrat summarily refuses him, citing the insulting content of Bartlet’s toast.⁶²⁴ In Crawley’s analysis, she describes Toby as being defined by his logical, straightforward approach to things and by his fearlessness in speaking truth to power.⁶²⁵ In this instance, however, Toby learns that sometimes not kissing an adversary’s ring can have serious consequences.

In another of the episode’s storylines, Mandy is similarly deflated. Mandy is given the chance to monitor and advise the president regarding an FBI stand-off with isolationists. The circumstances that led to the stand-off are not cut and dried because it was the U.S. who sold the isolationists illegal weapons in the first place, prompting a search the isolationists resist and leading to the standoff. Mandy’s advice, to take the peaceful approach and send in a negotiator instead of attempting to put a quick end to the situation with a show of force, ends with violence and the negotiator in critical condition.⁶²⁶ Her character up to this point in the season had displayed almost nothing other than bravado and self-congratulation at every turn. This storyline humbles her completely, leaving her stunned and feeling sick about the outcome of her advice.

⁶²⁴ “The State Dinner”

⁶²⁵ Crawley, 84

⁶²⁶ “The State Dinner”

In a third storyline, Bartlet is humbled on a personal level when he finds he cannot fix Leo's broken marriage just by ordering Leo to fix it. There are some things, he learns, that even the Commander-in-Chief cannot control. Abbey points out to the President that his inability to help Leo is causing him to overreact to an issue he is having with the trucking industry. "You have a big brain and a good heart and an ego the size of Montana," she tells him. "You don't have the power to fix everything."⁶²⁷

While Sorkin does put his characters up a tree and then makes things worse by throwing rocks at them, he also manages to get them back on track, allowing them to experience the revelation necessary to reach their heroic goal. In the aforementioned "Enemies," the episode in which the staff are determining what to do about a poison pill being attached to the banking bill, Josh wants to advise the President to veto the entire bill even though it is something Bartlet has championed. In this case, Sorkin uses Mandy's character to get Josh back on track, reminding him that these political fights distract from the real end game: better policy for America. Mandy warns him not to rile the President in a way that will lead him to make a bad decision: "When you're competitive, when you're combative, you juice up the President and you know it." Later, when the message has not sunk in, she tells him, "You're fighting the wrong fights, and you're doing it for the wrong reasons." This spurs Josh to find another way to kill the poison pill amendment without sacrificing the entire bill, and at the end of the episode, Josh shares his lesson with Bartlet himself, saying, "Mr. President, we talk about enemies more than we used to..."⁶²⁸ He realizes that the staff needs to continually work to stay grounded and on the side of righteousness, fairness, and acceptance.

⁶²⁷ "The State Dinner"

⁶²⁸ "Enemies"

As part of a greater arc, the nineteenth episode – aptly entitled, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet” – is about Leo realizing that the President needs to get back to trusting his gut and taking chances in order to be the best leader he can be. It is an incredibly inspiring episode, in which Leo tells Bartlet that his staff will go to the ends of the Earth for him if only he shares his vision and lets them off the leash. “Everyone’s waiting for you, I don’t know how much longer.” When Bartlet tells Leo he’s ready to speak and be heard, Leo gathers the senior staff to tell them that their leader is ready to take a more aggressive and aspirational tack in governing. “We’re not gonna be threatened by issues, we’re gonna put ‘em front and center,” he tells them. With this episode, the heroes are reinvigorated to go out into the world and attempt to cultivate the balance they have been lacking – and the audience is moved and reinvigorated right along with them.

The culturally-ingrained desire to see the fictional heroes of Sorkin’s fictional White House complete their Quests and achieve their policy goals plays a large role in uniting viewers of *The West Wing* who may be ideologically opposed. The audience wants to see the journey to the end; they expect it, they anticipate it, and they yearn to feel satisfied by it. Capitalizing on this cultural desire by relying on the Quest’s narrative structure is yet another way that Sorkin connects with a politically-diverse audience.

Equating Political Issues with Cultural Values

In addition to having the characters on *The West Wing* embody cultural values, Sorkin works to equate political issues with values that many American viewers claim as their own. As mentioned above, Sorkin presents Leo, Josh, C.J., Toby, Sam, and President Bartlet as heroes on a quest for the betterment of America through the

promotion of progressive values – however, the key is that Sorkin frames these progressive values as *American* values, or values a majority of Americans are assumed to share. This allows Sorkin to bring together a politically diverse audience by having his characters express and embody commonly-held values, because while politics divide, cultural values unite. Benjamin Franklin alludes to this phenomenon in his autobiography. In his example, he discusses religion as being divisive as it breeds a team versus team mentality. Later in his book he writes a list of virtues that could be used as a guide by people of any religion. His point is this: within a culture, being good is being good, regardless of what doctrine or vernacular one uses to define it.⁶²⁹

The stories in *The West Wing* target the places where American political and cultural ideas overlap. Americans are taught to embrace capitalism as an economic system, and as part of that lesson they are taught the values of working hard, taking personal responsibility, seizing opportunities, and pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. Americans are also taught to promote fairness and equality of opportunity, which may seem more traditionally liberal than those values mentioned above. While some of these values may seem to be at odds with one other in the political sense, if not also the cultural sense, the point is that they are vague and indeterminate enough to be utilized by a storyteller like Sorkin to envelope political issues in such a way that resonates with both conservative and liberal viewers.

What are “American values”? Sociologist Robin Murphy Williams spent a portion of his career working to identify what he determined to be the core values of American society. His list included the following: achievement and success; activity and work; moral orientation, or a belief in the paradigm of right and wrong; humanitarian

⁶²⁹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791), 80-81, 90

motives; efficiency and practicality; process and progress, or a belief that society will continually improve; material comfort, or The American Dream; equality; freedom; external conformity, or a resistance to “rock the boat;” science and rationality; nationalism, or the belief that America’s cultural values and institutions are the best in the world; democracy; individualism; and racism and group-superiority, or the belief – overt or subconscious – that prejudice against those who differ from the white European settlers who colonized America is justified.⁶³⁰ These values are introduced and reified as American values through storytelling in all its forms. They are useful for this project in particular because, while based on the ideas of American values that loom large in the nation’s cultural imagination, they also convey some of the complications of trying to connect abstract ideas to operable beliefs that may guide actual behavior. In addition, they reflect the sense that not all values are positive – such as racism and group-superiority – and that many are often contradictory – for instance, it is not always possible to achieve success and progress while maintaining external conformity.

The ethos with which Americans are culturally indoctrinated from birth tells them that they are the “good guys” and that they are exceptional. It encourages Americans to consider themselves to be autonomous, rights-conscious, and self-reliant individuals.⁶³¹ *The West Wing*’s characters often implicitly express the attitude of, “This is America, there are certain things we believe and there are certain ways we act.” This is evident in Sorkin’s storyline concerning Bartlet’s nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court, Roberto Mendoza. While on its face the story is about putting a liberal judge on the Supreme

⁶³⁰ Robin Murphy Williams, *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

⁶³¹ For more on this, Gottschall, 125; Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23, 44, 289

Court, Sorkin frames the story arc so that it is more about a hardworking American who has lived the *right* way, creating and seizing honest opportunities to better himself while serving the public good. In “The Short List,” the audience learns that Mendoza attended New York public schools, joined the New York City police force, was injured in the line of duty and took a desk job in order to continue serving, and put himself through law school at nights. He went on to become Assistant District Attorney for Brooklyn and rose through the ranks of the federal judicial system. In the same episode, Josh and Mandy discuss Mendoza’s credentials as compared to Peyton Cabot Harrison III, the person Bartlet had originally planned to nominate. Mandy rattles off Harrison’s elite, privileged pedigree and in response Josh emphasizes all the ways in which Mendoza has put in hard, honest work to get where he is today – in the position of being considered for the U.S. Supreme Court – as opposed to Harrison who has been born into privilege. With this, Josh invokes several of the American values from Williams’ list: achievement and success, activity and work, individualism, and the American Dream. He ends his endorsement of Mendoza as the nominee with one last appeal to the viewer’s sense of how exceptional Americans are: “He’s brilliant, decisive, compassionate, and experienced. And if you don’t think that he’s America’s idea of a jurist, then you don’t have enough faith in Americans.”⁶³²

In the same way that Sorkin relies on the acceptance of general standards for the ways in which Americans act, he exploits beliefs about the ways in which Americans should not. In “In Excelsis Deo,” Sorkin presents a story wherein a young boy named Lowell Lydell has been beaten to death by those seeking to punish him for his homosexuality. Charlie comes to tell the President just as he is doing an event with

⁶³² “The Short List”

school children, making them laugh by acting like he has forgotten in which country he is the President and asking them if he is the leader of other countries such as Bulgaria and Luxemburg. They keep answering, loudly, “America!”⁶³³ Their repeated chant just as Bartlet is discovering that an American teenager has died as the result of a hate crime underscores for the audience what they imagine to be going through Bartlet’s mind: how horrendous it is to think that such bigoted, violent hatred exists in America, the land of the free.

Throughout the first season of *The West Wing*, many of Sorkin’s stories invoke one of the following groupings of American values: democracy and nationalism, and freedom and bravery. The first two, democracy and nationalism, are continuously referenced as Sorkin regularly has his main characters demonstrate respect and reverence for the institution of the Presidency at all times. Mrs. Landingham, Bartlet’s executive secretary, often reminds the staff that they must always hold the office – both symbolically and in terms of the physical space – in the highest esteem as public servants. In the second episode, “Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc,” Leo reprimands Vice President John Hoynes for referring to Bartlet as “your pal” instead of by his proper title.⁶³⁴ These reminders of the sanctity of the office of the Presidency serve to solidify the respect the viewers have for the office and the people working there while simultaneously triggering admiration for the characters who insist that respect for the office be shown and prioritized above all else.

In Sorkin’s storylines, the characters maintain respect and reverence for their own jobs and the role they each get to play in serving the American people at such a high

⁶³³ “In Excelsis Deo”

⁶³⁴ “Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc”

level. In the third episode, “A Proportional Response,” Charlie is hired as Personal Aide to the President. Standing in the Oval Office as Bartlet is about to announce the attack on Syria on national television, Charlie leans over to Josh and says, “I’ve never felt like this before.” Josh replies, “It doesn’t go away.”⁶³⁵ It is a moving moment that tells the viewer that these characters know just how special it is to be where they are, doing what they do. In the final episode of the season, “What Kind of Day Has It Been,” Charlie stands in the audience of a town hall watching the President quote data that Charlie had found and prepared for him. He references their earlier conversation when he says to Josh, “You were right. It doesn’t go away.”⁶³⁶

Sorkin also taps into American viewers’ belief in a democratic form of government. In several storylines from the first season, *The West Wing’s* characters honor debate of a political issue and reinforce the democratic belief that debates are worth having. This too is an example of Sorkin presenting specific political issues in a way that, no matter how a viewer leans politically, can be interpreted by the viewer as an endorsement for an American value they support. Whether or not the audience member believes in slavery reparations, for instance, he or she may be able to subscribe to the idea that a debate about this issue – or any issue – is worth having. And in the case of Josh’s discussion about slavery reparations with Assistant Attorney General nominee Jeff Breckenridge, Crawley sums up what happens when Sorkin turns a debate over an issue into a celebration of American values: “An intense debate that covered topics from race relations to the Holocaust ends with an affective reading of the founding father’s vision

⁶³⁵ “A Proportional Response”

⁶³⁶ “What Kind of Day Has It Been”

for the country.”⁶³⁷ Sorkin can include the debate in his story and still have his characters “win” in the end, perhaps even solidifying the character’s position. As John Stuart Mill claims, a position faced with criticism that is left standing can gain credibility and legitimacy.⁶³⁸

Finally, Sorkin targets the audience’s feelings of nationalism by showing the characters striving to create a “more perfect” democracy. In episode nine, “The Short List,” wherein Supreme Court Justice Crouch gives Bartlet a hard time for planning to nominate a safe choice to the bench, Josh and Toby have a private conversation in which Josh admits similar disappointment that they are not planning to take a chance in nominating someone a little bolder, someone who might shake up the status quo. “When did we get the idea that Harrison was our guy?” Josh says to Toby. “When we used to talk, it was never Harrison.”⁶³⁹ In a similar vein of always trying to be better and aim higher, in “Take Out the Trash Day,” C.J. is disappointed in her government and in the administration she serves on a couple of points. Bartlet strikes a deal to get Leo off the hook for the fallout from his leaked personnel file that divulged the fact that he is a recovering addict, and the deal involves sitting on a sex education report that the Republicans do not want released. In the same episode, C.J. is instructed to meet with the father of Lowell Lydell, the young gay man who was murdered, who expresses dissatisfaction with President Bartlet for taking what he believes is a weak position on gay rights. C.J. is feeling disillusioned when she says to the President toward the end of

⁶³⁷ “Six Meetings Before Lunch”; Crawley, 105

⁶³⁸ John G. Geer, *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 11

⁶³⁹ “The Short List”

the episode, “Mr. President, we can all be better teachers.”⁶⁴⁰ In other words, she believes they should never stop trying to do a better job and trying to be better role models.

The second grouping of American values Sorkin continually invokes includes the two qualities that make American democracy possible and what those who protect American democracy embody: freedom and bravery. Sorkin conveys his characters’ bravery by writing storylines that enable them to take a stand. In episode twelve, “He Shall, From Time to Time...,” Toby encourages the President to make the most of the impending State of the Union by making his case for his progressive vision of government: “Tomorrow night, we do an immense thing. And we have to say what we feel. That government, no matter what its failures in the past and in times to come for that matter, government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind. No one gets left behind – an instrument of good.”⁶⁴¹ Toby urges Bartlet to not only say, but to trumpet an unpopular opinion: that the American government is a positive institution and it gets a lot right for the people it serves. Sorkin reaches his audience, whether they believe in small government or big, by framing Toby’s opinion as brave, first and foremost. And by also invoking the American value of equality in opportunity. Sorkin positions the nomination battle to place Mendoza on the bench in a similar manner in “The Short List,” having Bartlet describe it as “the good fight.”⁶⁴² In episode twelve, “He Shall, From Time to Time...,” Leo demonstrates bravery in the face of the Congressional Republicans who seek to expose his past as an addict. He declares

⁶⁴⁰ “Take Out the Trash Day”

⁶⁴¹ “He Shall, from Time to Time...” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Arlene Sanford. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

⁶⁴² “The Short List”

to Sam and Josh, when they make known their intent to defend him, “I go down, I go down. I’m not taking anyone with me.”⁶⁴³

The entire episode, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” is a demonstration of deciding to prioritize bravery above all else. Just as a memo is leaked accusing Leo of moving Bartlet to the middle on issues, Sam realizes that in spite of the fact that he has been asked to take some exploratory meetings with relevant leaders on the issue of gays in the military, he is not going to be given full reign to implement any policy change he sees fit to suggest to the President on the topic. By the end of the episode, Bartlet realizes that he wants to be braver and aim higher, telling Leo, “I’m sleeping better. And when I sleep, I dream about a great discussion with experts and ideas and diction and energy and honesty. And when I wake up, I think, I can sell that.”⁶⁴⁴ Once again, whether or not the viewer’s politics are in line with Bartlet’s, they feel inspired by his gumption and by his bravery.

Storylines involving freedom – perhaps Americans’ most culturally esteemed value – are apparent throughout the first season. In two instances, characters are shown espousing their belief that Americans deserve their freedom because they deserve to be trusted. In “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” part of the reason Leo urges the President to take a stand on more issues is because he believes Americans can be trusted to take full advantage of their democratic responsibility to participate in and understand the issues of the day.⁶⁴⁵ In the opening scene of “Mandatory Minimums,” Bartlet gives a speech about trusting Americans, which is typically a Republican talking point when conservatives

⁶⁴³ “He Shall, From Time to Time...”

⁶⁴⁴ “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

complain about too much governmental regulation turning American into a “nanny state.”⁶⁴⁶ This is another example of Sorkin’s writing appealing to a wide audience.

The West Wing spends a decent amount of time focused on the issue of privacy, a personal freedom revered in different instances by several political parties. In one episode in particular, “The Short List,” both Josh and Sam repeatedly make comments in support of personal privacy as the White House reacts to the accusation by a Republican congressman that one-third of its staffers use drugs. Josh commends Donna when she refuses to tattle on any coworkers she knows have taken drugs, and he emphasizes to Mandy that, “I would think that in this day and age people would be more comfortable knowing that they will not now, nor will they ever, be forced to turn over evidence against themselves.” Mendoza, the liberal Supreme Court nominee, wins points with the audience by weighing in on the topic, saying that no one in the White House should be forced to take a drug test. Toward the end of the episode, Sam directly equates the issue of privacy to the American value of freedom, saying, “The next two decades are going to be about privacy. I’m talking about the Internet, I’m talking about cell phones, I’m talking about health records and who’s gay and who’s not. And moreover, in a country born of the will to be free, what could be more fundamental than this?”⁶⁴⁷ In this case, Sorkin’s marriage of a political issue with an American value is explicit.

Sorkin uses another strategy in showcasing his characters celebrating the values of freedom and bravery through their support of military service. From Bartlet’s defense of his military doctor who was killed in episode two, to Toby’s storyline of obtaining a proper military burial for the homeless veteran who died wearing his coat, to Bartlet’s

⁶⁴⁶ “Mandatory Minimums”

⁶⁴⁷ “The Short List”

desire to protect an American pilot who has gone missing in Iraq's no-fly zone, Sorkin demonstrates that his characters possess a near-universal support of America's military.⁶⁴⁸

The multitude of examples provided within this section demonstrate Sorkin's skill in framing divisive issues within his storytelling in a way that encourages viewers to relate to them no matter their political beliefs. Sorkin's framing focuses on the ways in which policy goals relate loosely to elevated cultural values, and his stories showcase his characters promoting those cultural values through their pursuit of said policy goals. The preceding sections demonstrate how Sorkin prompts his viewers to embrace his characters, root for the completion of their Quests, and support their political aims. The section to follow will unveil the fourth strategy Sorkin uses to unite his politically diverse audience behind the characters of *The West Wing*: the use of unpopular institutions as enemies against which his heroes, and his viewers, can band together.

Use of Common "Enemies"

Thus far the discussion has covered how Sorkin's characters on *The West Wing* embody cultural ideals as they embark on heroic quests to promote progressive causes that have been equated with "American" values. But what does every hero need? A villain. The final tactic Sorkin uses to unite his audience and shore up support for his characters' goals is to rely on the specter of common enemies. Even though the political administration depicted in the television show is Democratic, the foes behind the challenges that arise for Sorkin's heroes in their quests for justice are not always Republicans.

⁶⁴⁸ "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc"; "In Excelsis Deo"; "What Kind of Day Has It Been"

Sorkin explains in interviews that the “enemy” within *The West Wing*’s storylines is not necessarily one political faction or another. “If there’s an enemy on this show,” Sorkin contends, “it’s a lack of conviction, a lack of compassion.”⁶⁴⁹ Worded another way, what his characters are shown to deplore is any action that is not dictated by a moral code that prioritizes doing what is *right*, and anyone not brave enough to stick to such a code when faced with adversity. Or, said still another way: those who do not abide by the “American” values detailed above. Similarly, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles see a lack of principle as a common trait of the villains on *The West Wing*, which at times take the form of members of Congress, private-sector political consultants, or opponents seeking office, whereas principle is precisely what guides each of Sorkin’s White House staffers. In a broader sense, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles see “the chaos of national and international affairs” as the Bartlet Administration’s primary villain that seeks to disrupt the principled order Sorkin’s characters seek to instill.⁶⁵⁰

In the pilot episode, the common enemy against which the staffers unite is religious (and specifically Christian) extremists.⁶⁵¹ While in America religious extremists are often associated with the Republican Party, by not mentioning the GOP specifically, and instead targeting very specific heinous acts committed by Christian extremists, Sorkin gives cover to Republican viewers, enabling them to disavow the acts and the perpetrators of the acts they see on the screen without disavowing their political loyalty. Sorkin also appeals to the intelligence of his viewers, and their respect for intelligence, by making the religious leaders appear uneducated when near the end of the episode one of them misstates one of the Ten Commandments. Sorkin’s religious

⁶⁴⁹ Barclay

⁶⁵⁰ For more on enemies of Bartlet, see Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 32, 50

⁶⁵¹ “Pilot”

extremists in the pilot are affiliated with a group called The Lambs of God. The Lambs of God, according to Sorkin, are based on a real-life group called “The Lambs of Christ,” known for committing terrorist acts against abortion providers and pro-choice advocates.⁶⁵² In the episode, the enemy, in the form of religious leaders, is shown to be hollow and hypocritical. Whereas the religious leaders only spout rhetoric, the White House staffers demonstrate to the audience that the facts are on their side. During a discussion wherein the religious leaders bring up condoms in schools, Toby retorts by quoting the Surgeon General’s stance that they greatly reduce teen pregnancy and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In every way that this external threat is *bad*, Sorkin redeems and elevates his characters as *good*. And by interacting with this common enemy, the characters are given the opportunity to demonstrate heroic characteristics: Toby defends Josh when Mary Marsh, one of the religious leaders, flaunts her assumption that Josh will be fired and makes a veiled reference to his Judaism; Leo defends Josh to the President, urging Bartlet not to fire him; Bartlet tells off the religious leaders for not denouncing the acts of the Lambs of Christ, and in the end decides not to fire Josh. Crawley explains how all of the above makes the audience feel: “The political issues the group represents become subordinate to the feelings [the final] scene generates about them.”⁶⁵³

Another bogeyman Sorkin uses time and again in *The West Wing* is Congress, which serves as an easy target as their approval rating has been dismal in recent

⁶⁵² Kathryn Joyce, “Violence of the Lambs: The Legacy of Anti-Choice Extremist Father Norman Weslin,” ReligionDispatches.org, June 6, 2012. Accessed November 6, 2012. <http://religiondispatches.org/violence-of-the-lambs-the-legacy-of-anti-choice-extremist-father-norman-weslin/>; Rob Owen, “Sheen for President: Just Another Clinton?,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 19, 1999.

⁶⁵³ Crawley, 83

decades.⁶⁵⁴ What proves to be a series-long contentious relationship between the Bartlet White House and Congress begins in episode four, “Five Votes Down,” wherein the staffers are working to pass a gun control bill that has been a pet project of the President’s. They think they finally have a clear path to passage, but learn at the eleventh hour that they are five votes down. The votes they have lost, however, are not because the legislators oppose the bill, but because the legislators want to hold the bill hostage in order to get something unrelated in return from the White House. The story arc sets Congress up as the enemy against whom this young Administration must fight in order to implement beneficial public policy. Josh sums up the White House’s feelings about the legislative branch in one line: “I’m so sick of Congress I could vomit.”⁶⁵⁵

In episode six, “Mr. Willis of Ohio,” Sorkin portrays Congressional legislators as selfish and unfair. He underscores this portrayal not only by pitting them against the “good” White House staffers, but also by contrasting them to Joe Willis, a brand new Congressman who is temporarily filling his late wife’s seat. An eighth grade social studies teacher, Willis’s interest is in learning, observing, and doing the right thing with his vote for the short time he plans to hold the seat in Congress. At a meeting on the topic of the U.S. Census, Congressional leaders argue that the Census process should remain the same: a paper-and-pencil count of each person in America. The Bartlet Administration argues for a move to sampling, a technique that is currently unconstitutional. The argument is that not sampling disadvantages urban, homeless, and poor communities. The Congressional leaders’ argument is that those populations lean Democrat, and thus sampling could be a boon for the Democratic Party. Sorkin frames

⁶⁵⁴ “Congress and the Public”

⁶⁵⁵ “Five Votes Down”

the two arguments in this way: the White House is looking out for the little guy, making sure he is counted and heard, while Congress is looking out for their own jobs and making sure they can keep them. Toby points out that while the Constitution rules out sampling, it also rules out counting slaves as whole persons. Willis is moved by Toby's argument and his argument alone; unlike his colleagues, he is not concerned with the politics of the situation. He explains his decision to side with the White House: "I think the right place to start is to say – fair is fair. This is who we are. These are our numbers."⁶⁵⁶ In comparison, his Congressional colleagues appear unreasonable and misguided.

Animosity toward Congress mounts throughout the first season and the entire series. All of this helps Sorkin unite a politically diverse audience by setting up an enemy they can all despise together. Nothing unites people more than a common enemy, and when the enemy is almost universally disliked and distrusted to begin with, considered by American society to be the poster child for prioritizing personal gain over the greater good and the biggest promoter of "politics as usual," all the better.⁶⁵⁷

This section has outlined the four primary ways in which Sorkin enables a politically-diverse audience to connect with and support the characters on *The West Wing*. By relying on the narrative structure of the hero's quest, linking both characters and political issues to targeted "American" values, and creating common enemies against which his heroes can fight, Sorkin elevates his political storylines above conventional party divisions, enabling the message of the show to be both entertaining and influential to an even broader audience.

⁶⁵⁶ "Mr. Willis of Ohio"

⁶⁵⁷ For more on this, see Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 47

Casualties of Sorkin's Narrative Strategies

What are some of the drawbacks of the approach Sorkin takes in uniting viewers of different political stripes into one satisfied audience? In addition to the “American” values listed above, what cultural beliefs and assumptions is he targeting? A close reading of the first season reveals that by relying on well-worn cultural tropes that resonate with an American audience, Sorkin's characters and storylines in many instances reinforce racial and gender stereotypes and obfuscate matters of difference. For what it is worth, *The West Wing* had cosmetic problems of difference from the start. Sorkin says that following the airing of the pilot, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought to his attention that the cast was overwhelmingly white and did not depict much racial diversity in the White House. “The NAACP is right,” Sorkin conceded, “The show needs to look like America.”⁶⁵⁸

But there are matters of concern that are less obvious than casting decisions with respect to Sorkin's writing. Sorkin can be found using tropes and character types that will resonate with the typical viewer because the typical viewer suffers from *implicit bias*, the virtually unconscious and involuntary discriminatory judgment of another person based on their superficial features or behaviors.⁶⁵⁹ As an example, Sorkin creates characters and sets up their storylines in a way that he knows will pull on the viewer's heartstrings with little regard for subtlety. More than once in the first season, *The West Wing* introduces minorities who come from difficult backgrounds, have overcome adversity, and now have young female dependents reliant on them. In the second

⁶⁵⁸ Patrick Goldstein, “On a Wing and a Prayer,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1999. Accessed November 14, 2015. <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/oct/10/entertainment/ca-20753/5>.

⁶⁵⁹ “Implicit Bias,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed November 12, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/>; for more on the impossibility of separating cultural memory, race, and gender, see Taylor, 86

episode, viewers meet Bartlet's new military doctor, the aforementioned Captain Tolliver, who is a man of color with a ten-day old newborn daughter who, the audience learns quickly, has been named after an ancestor who survived slavery in America.⁶⁶⁰ Then in the next episode, viewers are introduced to Charlie, the young black man with a deadbeat father, a deceased police officer mother who was killed in the line of duty, and a younger sister whom he must now support.⁶⁶¹ As noted earlier, Charlie is shown to be unambitious, not wanting to interview for the Personal Aide to the President job when he merely applied for the messenger job. This plot point is important because it makes him less threatening to the viewer, as young black men tend to be seen in America, and thus he endears himself to the audience even more.⁶⁶² Captain Tolliver is killed at the end of the second episode when Syria attacks the plane that he and dozens of other health workers are on as they fly to a teaching hospital in Amman.⁶⁶³ In episode three, viewers get to see Bartlet's reaction to the news.⁶⁶⁴ Sorkin portrays Bartlet as a bleeding heart about Morris's death, and juxtaposes this with Bartlet's hawkish turn in wishing to obliterate those responsible. There is something for every stripe of political viewer in this portrayal.

In both of these instances, Sorkin's white characters are able to both pity and celebrate minorities who have overcome prejudice and difficult circumstances. The stance is somewhat patronizing but relatable to an audience who suffers from implicit bias. The storylines work to alleviate a white viewer's guilt of being an oppressor,

⁶⁶⁰ "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc"

⁶⁶¹ "A Proportional Response"

⁶⁶² Jennifer A. Richeson and Meghan G. Bean, "Does Black and Male Still = Threat in the Age of Obama?," *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America?* Gregory Parks and Matthew Hughey, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95

⁶⁶³ "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc"

⁶⁶⁴ "A Proportional Response"

because these minority men are shown to have achieved success despite the odds. Sorkin plays on these subtle, internalized cultural assumptions that are possessed by liberal and conservative Americans alike and that are intertwined with many other cultural beliefs and values Americans hold, such as pulling oneself up by one's boot straps, possessing a tough work ethic, and celebrating social progress.⁶⁶⁵

According to interviews, Sorkin identifies both as a liberal and as a person who has no problem with interracial romances. He admits that he was surprised when *The West Wing* received hate mail in reaction to the development of Charlie's romantic relationship with the President's white daughter, Zoey.⁶⁶⁶ But despite his self-conception as someone who is tolerant to identity differences, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles see overarching instances of racism and promotion of whiteness throughout his writing on *The West Wing*, and they contend that on matters of race, President Bartlet is "ambivalent." The authors see the racialized "other" often serving as the Bartlet Administration's villain in matters of national security, and see matters of race and gender – and the proponents of those issues – as marginalized time and again because they get in the way of the ideal of one powerful, united American nation. *The West Wing*, they write, "clearly fosters the bifurcation between its heroic and romanticized white president, who represents the whole, against proponents of identity politics who represent the self-interested few."⁶⁶⁷

Sorkin also has been accused of having a "woman" problem throughout his career as a screenwriter. Media critics observe that, with the exception of C.J. Cregg, his female characters tend to be two-dimensional at best, and hysterical and incompetent at worst.

⁶⁶⁵ R. M. Williams

⁶⁶⁶ Deggans, 2001

⁶⁶⁷ Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 17, 98, 109-110

He also has a tendency to write lines wherein one character insults another by insinuating they are behaving as a woman.⁶⁶⁸ While there has been less scrutiny on how he handles gender on *The West Wing* than in some of his other projects (*A Few Good Men*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *The Newsroom*, *The Social Network*), there is evidence of a negligence in taking care to not depict women stereotypically. Participating in a discussion at a book signing in Los Angeles, a fan observed and subsequently posted on the popular online forum TelevisionWithoutPity.com that Sorkin admitted that he has written female characters as props for male characters and as depictions of male fantasies, and that this was a weakness in his writing. But he did not express regret or an interest in trying to avoid doing so, instead excusing it as a problem that a lot of male writers have.⁶⁶⁹ In another instance, when asked about why he had Mandy use the term “bitch-slapping” in the pilot, he did not seem particularly concerned with the implications of the phrase and defended it in the way he defends many of his creative decisions: that he thinks it works and is entertaining to the audience.⁶⁷⁰ “I would never have a man saying it to a woman...but in that character, and in that actress, frankly I find it endearing.”⁶⁷¹ With that response, one can almost hear Sam Seaborn defending himself to C.J. for

⁶⁶⁸ For more on this, see: Eliana Dockterman, “Dear Aaron Sorkin, If You Don’t Think There Are Enough Good Roles for Actresses, Write One Yourself,” *Time*, December 16, 2014. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://time.com/3636226/aaron-sorkin-women-roles-hollywood/>; Jace Jacob and Maureen Ryan, “HBO’s ‘The Newsroom’: Aaron Sorkin’s Woman Problem,” *TheDailyBeast.com*, July 2, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/02/hbo-s-the-newsroom-aaron-sorkin-s-women-problem.html>; Sarah, “Does Aaron Sorkin Have A Woman Problem?,” *New Statesman*, September 2, 2013. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.newstatesman.com/tv-and-radio/2013/09/does-aaron-sorkin-have-woman-problem>; Alyssa Rosenberg, “Why Aaron Sorkin’s Woman Problem Makes *The Newsroom* So Boring,” *Slate.com*, July 3, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/07/03/why_aaron_sorkin_s_woman_problem_makes_the_new_sroom_so_boring_.html.

⁶⁶⁹ mjforty, January 29, 2004, comment on televisionwithoutpity.com Forum, “Notes from a second L.A. book signing with Aaron Sorkin,” *The West Wing*, January 29, 2004, Reposted on http://www.westwingepguide.com/S1/Episodes/1_PILOT.html (Access June 9, 2014).

⁶⁷⁰ “Pilot”

⁶⁷¹ Eric Deggans, “The Brains Behind the Shows,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 17, 1999.

pursuing a friendship with Laurie the call girl, when he declares that they should all spend a little more time concerned with *being* good than rather than looking good: Sorkin does not actually believe women should be slapped like bitches, so why does it matter if he uses the phrase in his script?⁶⁷²

In small and large ways, Sorkin uses women stereotypically in *The West Wing*. Every single assistant to the senior staffers is female, and at times they are shown to be gossipy and simple-minded. The title of episode five, “The Crackpots and These Women,” comes from a moment toward the end of the show where Bartlet looks around the room at a gathering of staffers and says, “We can’t get over these women,” as he talks about their accomplishments.⁶⁷³ In a way he seems to be saying that they have exceeded the expectations he had of them as women. In another way he seems to be expressing his gratitude to them as help-meets to the mostly male senior staffers. It is a patriarchal and patronizing statement about a group of world-class political operatives who happen to be female. In the episode about the census, which is successful in many regards, it is slightly painful to watch C.J. have to grovel to Sam and make herself, in her words, “submissive” to him so that she can fully understand this policy topic.⁶⁷⁴ In episode nine, “The Short List,” reporter Danny Concannon suggests a date with C.J. that would involve him explaining basketball in a patronizing manner.⁶⁷⁵ In that instance, Sorkin seems to be poking more fun at men than women, and so it provides an interesting example of Sorkin being aware of gender issues in some ways, and oblivious or neglectful in others.

⁶⁷² “A Proportional Response”

⁶⁷³ “The Crackpots and These Women”

⁶⁷⁴ “Mr. Willis of Ohio”

⁶⁷⁵ “The Short List”

Sorkin offers commentary on these issues on a message board run by a website called MightyBigTV.com, which later became TelevisionWithoutPity.com. Reading over posts discussing his treatment of women on the show, he responded personally, addressing several of the criticisms. In terms of the “girl” jokes, Sorkin writes:

When Josh says something like “Toby, come quick, Sam’s gettin’ his ass kicked by a girl”, I think where most people find the humor is in the comic immaturity of the guys, and not that it’s funny to call a woman a girl. I think when Leo tells Margaret “You’re a good girl”, a lot of people hear that as the beautiful sentiment it was intended to be, coming from the mouth of a guy born in Chicago in the 40’s.

In reaction to the casting of all the assistants as women, he says:

The women on *The West Wing* aren’t just secretaries. They’re Press Secretaries and HUD Secretaries and National Security Advisors and Associate Counsels and Congresswomen and college students and medical students and surgeons and Surgeon Generals. They divorce their husbands when they’re not happy in their marriage and they go out on their own when their boyfriends ditch them. They face down Admirals in the Situation Room and the President in the Oval Office. They are hyper-competent. They’re also compassionate, passionate, persuasive and respected by everyone around them.⁶⁷⁶

Crawley provides two interesting insights regarding C.J.’s character in particular. She sees Sorkin as often writing C.J. to express emotional vulnerability. But more than that, Crawley sees C.J. as the one senior staffer who seems anxious about her ability to serve the President competently and who is given storylines where she must repeatedly prove her value to the team. On a deeper level, Crawley sees C.J. as representing “later-stage political socialization. Moving beyond an understanding of the president as the sole instrument of government, she assigns the citizenry its role in politics, implicating the public in policy outcomes.”⁶⁷⁷ This is fascinating because, if Crawley’s analysis is

⁶⁷⁶ Sarah, February 15, 2001 (11:04 pm), comment on Yahoo! Groups, “Aaron’s MBTV posts,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, February 15, 2001, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/2407>.

⁶⁷⁷ Crawley, 87, 89

correct, that means C.J.'s character is the one responsible for voicing to her colleagues that they need to remember that the citizenry must be included and considered as part of every governing discussion and decision. This is exactly the work feminists often find themselves doing on a broader level: bringing women and women's issues in greater national and local conversations.

These deliberations about matters of difference and how different identities are portrayed on the show by Sorkin are part of a greater means versus ends discussion that one would not be surprised to see played out on an episode of *The West Wing*. As evidenced by Sorkin's posts on MightyBigTV.com's message boards, it is clear that these are things he has thought about. In a post from February 13, 2001, he asks, "Are women so in need of protection that a writer's mission must, before all else, be to insure that anything a female character does necessarily reflect well on women in general? And isn't it even a little insidious to think that women in fiction must first be regarded as a group rather than [sic] individuals?" As Duncombe admits in his treatise imploring progressives to stop being so reasonable in their attempts to influence voters, sometimes the very types of communication that are meant to persuade appeal "to our worst traits" in order to do so. He continues by saying that "the challenge for progressives is to create ethical spectacles."⁶⁷⁸ It is not entirely clear whether Sorkin has managed this.

An American Studies Perspective on Sorkin's Strategies and Successes

This chapter and the one preceding it have detailed *The West Wing's* place in American culture as a specimen of storytelling, and analyzed the ways in which Sorkin targets the cultural values of his viewers in order to evoke emotion and unite the audience

⁶⁷⁸ Duncombe, 17

behind the political aims of his characters. This chapter has outlined where Sorkin's strategies are most successful and where perhaps he could improve his portrayal of diverse American characters. This section will consider how Sorkin's approach might be viewed or judged by scholars and practitioners within the field of American Studies.⁶⁷⁹

One of the first problems that American Studies scholars might find with Sorkin's style, and this chapter's discussion of a set of values as "American," is that they emphasize sameness, minimize diversity, and do not acknowledge the countless cultures and subcultures that exist simultaneously within and across America's borders. This criticism is precisely why Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School took issue with the film industry in the mid-twentieth century when he argued that films turn unique things into sameness.⁶⁸⁰ The difficulty for storytellers who are attempting to influence an audience – whether by provoking feelings within them or by convincing them to think a certain way about a certain issue – is that sameness is how humans relate to each other and how a storyteller can relate his or her story to an audience. Nevertheless, the field of American Studies prioritizes difference, division, and "dissensus."⁶⁸¹ Perhaps this is a drawback of storytelling, despite some of the exciting opportunities it can provide for the sharing of diverse experiences. Native American Studies scholar Greg Sarris points out that expressing cultural truths through one type of narrative – the hero's journey as an example – can be limiting to those who rely on it.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁹ For more on the values of American Studies as a discipline, see Glacel, "American Studies History & Theory Comprehensive Exam."

⁶⁸⁰ Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), para.11

⁶⁸¹ Radway, 2, 9-10

⁶⁸² Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 68

All types of communication delivered on a mass scale, including storytelling, have been a concern to scholars across many disciplines for some time. The charge has been that popular or mass culture in general minimizes critical thinking and increases the opportunity for manipulation of the public. In 1934, Emma Goldman opined that pop culture packaged “factory-made ideas and beliefs” that were accepted with minimum consideration by its audiences. Jürgen Habermas criticizes television, radio, and films as putting the audience in “tutelage,” with viewers uncritically receiving information. Habermas argues that this restricts the breadth of the responses that viewers could have to the information received through these forms of mass media.⁶⁸³ If this is true, is there an advantage to be found within this communication scenario for storytellers? If storytelling on a mass scale allows storytellers to disseminate progressive ideas that benefit society, do the ends justify the means, no matter how many critiques scholars harbor about mass culture?

Does the potential viability of these concerns complicate American Studies’ relationship with storytelling? In one way, American Studies scholars would likely be wary of the concept of uncritical reception; it represents the opposite of reflexivity and the consciousness required to identify racial, gender, and intersectional subjectivities and hierarchies. Further, how much does the question of a high and low culture distinction factor into this discussion?⁶⁸⁴ Is it necessary or is it dangerous to make distinctions about “legitimate” storytelling and “manipulative” storytelling? In defense of the discipline’s investment in the practice, storytelling is of interest as a cultural phenomenon, and mass

⁶⁸³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 171

⁶⁸⁴ For more on the terms of the culture debate and the high/low culture distinction, see Hall, *Two Paradigms*, 521

culture is of interest as a reflection of society. Additionally, storytelling can be and is used for activist means and to raise consciousness.

Prominent American Studies scholars consider stories and storytelling to hold significance both in terms of what they say about culture and how they influence culture. George Lipsitz contends specifically that the serial format of television narratives has had an influence on the way in which humans craft narratives in modern times.⁶⁸⁵ Stuart Hall's discussion of culture as the lived traditions and practices through which societal understandings are expressed would likely categorize storytelling as one of the things that embodies the meanings and values of a culture.⁶⁸⁶ And Sarris sees storytelling in much the same way that Gottschall does, as a part of culture that teaches proper and improper behavior, justifies oppression or liberation, and has the potential to be used for the facilitation of critical cultural discussions.⁶⁸⁷

Overwhelmingly, though, various scholars within the field of American Studies offer statements that would seem supportive of Sorkin's storytelling as creator and writer of *The West Wing* inasmuch as he uses storytelling to showcase and make arguments for progressive values and causes. According to Patricia Hill Collins' definition, Sorkin can be considered a public intellectual based on the fact that through his work on *The West Wing*, he is presenting, promoting, and critiquing certain strands of social and political thought. Collins believes many forms of expression, including artistic and popular cultures, to be just as worthy as academic theory if they work to reduce oppression and improve the experiences of humans. In this way, Sorkin's writing and other examples of

⁶⁸⁵ George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies" in Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 322

⁶⁸⁶ Hall, *Two Paradigms*, 527

⁶⁸⁷ Sarris, 4, 7

storytelling can be classified as activism where activism is defined as bettering the experiences of others.⁶⁸⁸ Stuart Hall, in his discussion of Antonio Gramsci's relevance to the study of racial and ethnic diversity, asserts that ideologies that relate to everyday common sense as humans experience it "create the terrain" on which humans "acquire consciousness of their position [and] struggle."⁶⁸⁹ Sorkin packages such ideologies in the stories he tells on *The West Wing*.

Sorkin's storytelling as packaged for and disseminated through prime time television also accomplishes something that many scholars in the humanities consider crucial: accessibility, in both meanings of the word. First, it reaches a large number of people in the relaxed atmosphere of their private sphere. Second, it presents them with high-minded concepts in way they can understand. As 19th Century abolitionist Harriet Farley said, "To convince people, we must gain access to them."⁶⁹⁰ Access is the first hurdle. Academics and politicians may have good ideas, but without a pulpit from which to spout them and an audience rapt enough to listen, the ideas remain a mystery to the masses, whereas a popular television show is a pulpit and its audience is rapt. With his storytelling on *The West Wing*, Sorkin is able to combine "high" theory with "low" common sense in a way that engages the average American. He is taking complicated political and cultural issues, expressing them in plain and effective language, and relating them to the viewer's everyday life, while *reaching* the viewer in his or her everyday life as they sit on their couch and unwind at the end of the day by watching television.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁸ Collins, 9, 15, 31, 33

⁶⁸⁹ Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:5 (1986), 431

⁶⁹⁰ Douglas, 71

⁶⁹¹ For more on translating and delivering theoretical and progressive thought to the common person, see Lipsitz, 316; Hall, Two Paradigms, 268; Nadia Urbinati, "Reading J.S. Mill's The Subjection of Women as Text of Deliberative Rhetoric," in Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, & Gary Remer, eds., *Talking*

Possessing the talent and opportunity to accomplish this on such a grand scale is no small thing.

“We’re gonna raise the level of public debate in this country and let that be our legacy.”
Leo McGarry, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”

Conclusion

There are a multitude of reasons that Sorkin’s storytelling is able to connect with a politically-diverse audience. At its most basic, *The West Wing* is successful for two reasons: it targets the audience’s values and not their political affiliation, and it moves its viewers emotionally. In terms of the first reason, Sorkin targets his viewers’ values and builds on them as “already formed and ‘taken-for-granted’ terrain,” as Stuart Hall describes common sense to be.⁶⁹² Shared cultural values are common and they are what humans use to make and justify sense. While the myriad cultures and subcultures in America differ in more ways than can be named, many of those individual microcosms hold overlapping ideas about what “America” is. Ideas can intersect at times even when everyday experiences do not, a concept that resonates in journalist and historian Theodore H. White’s declaration that “Americans are held together only by ideas.”⁶⁹³

In terms of the second reason, that Sorkin’s writing moves his audience emotionally, the material experience of this is described time and again by the fans who post on Internet message boards about being moved to tears by the “rollercoaster” of emotions in each episode and needing a box of tissues reliably at hand when they watch

Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric & Democracy (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 284; Bentley, 134; Angela, “Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies,” in Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 721

⁶⁹² Hall, Gramsci, 431

⁶⁹³ Crawley, 9

the show.⁶⁹⁴ Yahoo! user Britt posts, “I can’t watch a single episode with out [sic] getting the chills or tearing up or laughing or just being enthralled for 60 minutes. I love that I’m a die hard republican [sic] yet I can identify and cheer for people of the opposition, [sic] because [Sorkin] makes them so darn human and makes them so passionate about their causes.”⁶⁹⁵

Sorkin utilizes common “American” values to influence how the audience feels, and by influencing how his audience feels, he creates the *opportunity* to influence how his audience thinks. Yahoo! user John Magee writes a post that touches on many aspects of the experience that Sorkin’s storytelling inspires, beginning with a “visceral” emotional reaction, moving into support of the characters and their aims, and ending with an inspiration to act: “Almost every first season episode brought an emotional response from when mr willis [sic] talked to toby [sic][,] I cried[.] when josh [sic] told the senator to shove his legislative agenda[,] I stood on my bed and cheered. I pumped my fists or laughed out loud repeatedly...” He finishes the post by saying that the first season episodes “spur me to act.”⁶⁹⁶ It is not evident precisely what he means by “act,” but he seems to say that he was moved to do something by the power of Sorkin’s storytelling; it is unknown whether that is something as drastic as changing political behavior or engaging in activism, or as minor as standing on his bed. Two participants in IMDB.com’s online forums also discuss being moved to take action by Sorkin’s writing, hypothetical as these declarations are. User Dust_Indotex posts, “I consider myself a

⁶⁹⁴ Marty, September 1, 2008, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “Bringing emotions threw the spoken word,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, September 1, 2008, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/40958>.; Lida Rose, August 29, 2002, comment on Yahoo! Groups, “They Don’t Resonate,” *The Aaron Sorkin Chronicles*, August 29, 2002, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AaronSorkin/conversations/messages/22624>.

⁶⁹⁵ Britt, 23 Oct 2001

⁶⁹⁶ John Magee, 29 Aug 2002

moderate conservative and I would've voted for Bartlett and then Santos. Reason being is that they seemed to want to become President in order to actually lead the country.”⁶⁹⁷ User Steppy412 adds, “If real Democrats were like these people - I would vote for them in a second.”⁶⁹⁸

It would be extremely difficult to determine precisely how successful Sorkin's stories have been in influencing America politically or culturally. But as outlined in this chapter, his work has rendered him a sought-after political communicator and he has been embraced by political writers such as Maureen Dowd, political ad-writers and fundraisers, and emulated by political speechwriters. His writing has been lauded by the President of the United States as the pinnacle of political rhetoric, and both Obama and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton have made high-profile speeches that include unmistakably Sorkin-esque lines.⁶⁹⁹ He has been credited with influencing young Americans to enter the world of politics, with influencing the introduction of legislation, and with enlightening viewers on obscure and involved political issues. He has bolstered, if not shaped, a cultural vision of what an ideal public servant should be, and inspired some Americans to embrace a life of public service – an effect to which Allison Janney has attested: “It's rewarding for me to have people come up to me still to this day and say, ‘C.J., your character, made me change my major in college, and now I'm going into public service.’” One must remember, though, that C.J. Cregg was Sorkin's character, her storylines written by Sorkin.

⁶⁹⁷ Dust_Indotex, 14 May 2014

⁶⁹⁸ Steppy412, 15 May 2014

⁶⁹⁹ Sam Frizell, “Transcript: Read the Full Text of Hillary Clinton's Campaign Launch Speech,” *Time.com*, June 13, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://time.com/3920332/transcript-full-text-hillary-clinton-campaign-launch/>.

Taking the question of influence further, has Sorkin influenced individual voters? He has educated them, certainly. Has he enabled political narratives like Obama's successful candidacy as a young, minority presidential candidate to play out, as some have theorized? That is harder to tell, but it does not necessarily seem far-fetched. If Sorkin has achieved these things – promoting progressive policies and a devotion to public service through a culturally-embraced television show – while managing to entertain an audience and be celebrated as both an artist and a political mind, can this be considered success if one cannot count the resulting votes at the ballot box? Is it success if the medium is storytelling rather than speech-making? Is the question of means important if the ends are laudable? And finally, is *The West Wing* political propaganda, even if Sorkin denies that it is? Given all the evidence presented in these chapters, and all the influence that one television show and its creator have had, the answers seem clear.

“[A story] can be emotionally convincing, it can be intellectually convincing, it can be politically convincing. Hopefully it’s all those things.”
Jonathan Galassi, Publisher⁷⁰⁰

CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION

At the outset of this project, the subjects for its two case studies were chosen because they use storytelling to communicate to mass audiences on political topics, and – in the opinion of this scholar – they are good at it. That one small declaration, that someone is good at something, that something has been done well and executed in a way that is pleasing, seems very personal and individual, and in some ways it is. But in other ways the declaration is reflective of the culture in which the pleasing thing is produced and the culture in which the pleasing thing is consumed. It is this conceptual framework that underlies the driving question behind this entire endeavor: *why do readers believe that Anna Quindlen and Aaron Sorkin are good at what they do?* This question ignited this dissertation’s investigation into humans’ cultural relationship with storytelling. It also led to another question: how do Quindlen and Sorkin manage to tell stories about political subject matter in a way that resonates with their audience, and in a way that their political opinions appear to dovetail with their audience’s tests of narrative fidelity and coherence? This question steered the investigation toward narrative structure, storytelling strategies, and cultural values.

The purpose of this project is to think about the ways humans’ cultural relationship with storytelling enable stories to be used to communicate politically divisive subject matter in a way that connects with a politically diverse audience. The two case studies were undertaken to examine the narrative strategies of political columnist Anna

⁷⁰⁰ Evgenia Peretz, “It’s Tartt – But Is It Art?,” *Vanity Fair*, July 2014. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/07/goldfinch-donna-tartt-literary-criticism>.

Quindlen and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin in their efforts to tell stories about liberal political subject matter to readers and viewers of all political stripes. Overlaps in their techniques are evident. Both writers prioritize an emotional connection with their audience, using narrative structure and character portrayals to provoke feelings of empathy, identification, and a hope that the protagonist would succeed. Both writers frame their political subject matter in terms of cultural values to which their audience could relate and offer support. And both writers draw in their audience, above all else entertaining them and satisfying them with narratives that make them feel good for having experienced them and yearn to experience them again.

In this final chapter, the question of a storyteller's intent versus a storyteller's effect will be considered. What do both Quindlen and Sorkin say they were trying to achieve through the stories they tell, and how does that compare to the ways in which audience members describe the experience of reading or watching their stories? Are Quindlen's and Sorkin's intents more similar than initially assumed? Are their effects? This chapter will also feature a discussion on the question of what makes this approach to storytelling – wherein culture's relationship with the practice is prioritized – a valid approach to the subject matter.

Intent versus Effect in the Case Studies

The initial assumptions for this dissertation were that both Quindlen and Sorkin used storytelling to communicate about political subject matter, though for different purposes. In the case of Anna Quindlen, who has led dual careers as a journalist and an author of fiction, it was assumed that the primary and overt purpose of her writing is

political influence, with storytelling playing a secondary role as a communication strategy. In the case of Sorkin, a screenwriter with a history of political involvement, it was assumed that the primary and overt purpose of his writing is entertainment, with political influence arising as a side effect.

Analyses of these two writers find that there are certain approaches in storytelling at which each excel. Quindlen's columns utilized several narrative strategies to great effect, including her implementation of narrative structure to engage her audience, her ability to evoke and resolve emotions in a satisfying way, and her talent for inducing empathy on the part of the reader and a personal investment in a political topic. Sorkin's screenplays also utilized a number of narrative strategies successfully, including the construction of his characters to embody particular cultural values, emulation of the hero's quest, the framing of political issues to reflect and evoke cultural values, and the upholding of unpopular American institutions as strawmen whom his heroes could challenge. Though some of their strategies were different, Quindlen and Sorkin were ultimately engaging in the same exercise, relying on their cultural understanding of humanity and their audience's cultural relationship to storytelling to trigger emotions in their audiences and to target their cultural values.

All of these strategies are encompassed within two storytelling umbrellas: to educate and influence, and to entertain and connect with the audience. It was initially assumed at the outset of research that Quindlen prioritizes the first and Sorkin prioritizes the second, but that both are taking place for their respective audiences. However, neither of these interpretations fully takes into account what Quindlen and Sorkin say they are doing, nor what their audience members feel like they are experiencing.

Quindlen's intention, according to her interview with this scholar, was to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted."⁷⁰¹ Sorkin's intention, according to statements he has made to the media, was "first and foremost, if not only" to entertain.⁷⁰²

Taking Quindlen and Sorkin at their word, it appears their goals were more alike than initially assumed by this scholar. Both prioritize a nonpolitical pursuit: for Quindlen it is to connect with her audience and for Sorkin it is to entertain them. Quindlen does, to be fair, also mention her aim to "afflict the comfortable," which seems to be an admission that she hopes to stir the pot with her writing. And then there is Sorkin's implicit commentary on current events to be considered, the moments on *The West Wing* wherein he chooses to portray a parallel political reality that is recognizable because it has been only slightly altered from recent events, as he did in season four when he said, "We're going to rerun the last election and try a few different plays than the Gore campaign did."⁷⁰³

It seems, then, that both writers prioritize their storytelling's ability to provoke feelings of pleasure over their storytelling's political message, though each aspect plays a role in their craft. The effects of which are what? Quindlen's effects, according to customer reviews of her collections of columns, are that readers feel a strong sense of connection, a heightened level of clarity on the subject matter, and at times a shift of perspective.⁷⁰⁴ Sorkin's effects, according to message board posts of his fans, are that

⁷⁰¹ Quindlen, e-mail

⁷⁰² Altman

⁷⁰³ "'The West Wing' Dream of Democracy," *New Yorker*

⁷⁰⁴ SanFrantastic; Cozzens; Woolridge; A Reader; Life Out Loud

viewers feel inspired, educated and informed on policy and governance, and “visceral” emotional reactions to his storytelling.⁷⁰⁵

Both audiences point to Quindlen’s and Sorkin’s abilities to make them feel good as an audience member, leaving them satisfied emotionally and intellectually. Both audiences think that these storytellers get *what matters*, though there does appear to be a subtle difference in their comments. Many of Sorkin’s viewers seem to think he gets what matters *in life*, his stories promoting the values of doing what is right, serving others, elevating loyalty and duty. Many of Quindlen’s readers seem to think she gets what matters in life *to them*. They feel that she relates to them, that she gets them, and that she has walked in their shoes and understands the meaning of it all.

Therefore it seems that Sorkin, who purports to want nothing other than to entertain his audience – an audience often comprised of individual viewers sitting alone in their living rooms or in small numbers in their private spheres – manages to make a significant cultural, if not political, impression on the public sphere in America. And Quindlen, whose column appeared in a widely available magazine – obtained and consumed in the public sphere, purchased from newsstands and grocery store check-out counters, possibly read during daily commutes on public transportation or while sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room – manages to craft impactful statements about the personal sphere.

⁷⁰⁵ Jesse, 23 Oct 2001, Jenny, 23 Oct 2001, Rhonda, 23 Oct 2001, Melissa, 22 Oct 2001, Christine, 23 Oct 2001, Britt, 23 Oct 2001, Jessica, 24 Oct 2001, Kel, 23 Oct 2001, Pat, 26 Oct 2001, comments on Yahoo! Groups, “New Group Questionnaire”; Magee

A Focus on the Experience of Storytelling

How can the two case studies be compared in terms of the “success” of their effects? Did either have more of a reach? One could look at circulation numbers, rankings of books sold, website hits, Nielson ratings, DVD sales, and Netflix subscriptions, but it would be all but impossible to definitively enumerate the number of people who have been exposed to Quindlen’s columns or *The West Wing*. What is known is that for each of these storytellers, the number is in the millions, if not tens of millions. Both Quindlen and Sorkin are able to communicate on a large scale to a wide swath of Americans throughout the decades they have enjoyed prominence in American political and popular culture.

Did either Quindlen or Sorkin have the *potential* for a greater effect, based on the medium or on their approach? This is a question that may be easier to tease out, and it is likely that communication scholars would find it an inquiry of interest. Because Quindlen’s medium, a political column, is more identifiable as a piece of political communication with a liberal bias, the potential exists for readers of her work to be more self-selecting politically than viewers of *The West Wing*. If that were true, then a broader audience would be exposed to the political messages of Sorkin’s show. On the other hand, perhaps there is the potential for Quindlen to be harder-hitting in her communication because she can be more transparent in her attempt to politically influence her audience. These are interesting questions but, again, they fall under a rubric of quantification that is more appropriate from a communication perspective and not the perspective offered by this particular project, which has taken pains to avoid

approaching the analysis of storytelling from a quantitative position. It remains that some of the project's inquiries do not have quantifiable answers.

What makes this project different from a quantitative communication investigation is its focus on how Quindlen's and Sorkin's political stories are experienced by their audiences, something that is much different from attempting to define their effectiveness in terms of the number of minds changed or the frequency with which communication experiment participants record manufactured reactions by pressing buttons on a machine. The question of the experience of hearing, reading, or watching a story, and how that experience impacts the effect that the story's message will have on its audiences, are elevated within American Studies, a field that prioritizes a focus on identity and difference. The study of identity and difference has emphasized a focus on audience as part of the discipline's material approach to scholarly inquiries.

Older scholarship on the topic of popular culture, including that of the Frankfurt school, fails to consider how people consume and manipulate material culture for their own uses and enjoyment, the result being that vital insight is lost. Robin D. G. Kelley asserts that this is a shortcoming of many social scientists who fail to investigate how popular culture. Using the example of "the dozens" within African American culture, Kelley writes, "Black music, creativity and experimentation in language, that walk, that talk, that style, must also be understood as sources of visceral and psychic pleasure."⁷⁰⁶ Ann Cvetkovich has written about the queering of "hetero" popular culture by lesbians, taking as an example the gay community's embrace of Judy Garland – a presumably

⁷⁰⁶ Kelley, 40-41

straight actress – as an icon and symbol.⁷⁰⁷ Cvetkovich posits that objects such as posters, novels, movies, and aspects of material culture do not mean anything on their own, instead they are *made* to mean by their audience and possessors.⁷⁰⁸ Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has stated that these social responses to material culture are what allow people to understand society, not the object or performance itself.⁷⁰⁹

For the purpose of this project, then, it does not seem necessary to ask, which storyteller communicated more effectively across political divides? It is clear from the reader and viewer posts found online that both Quindlen and Sorkin have an effect on their audience. Sometimes the effect is emotional and sometimes it is material. Sometimes it is personal and sometimes it is political. And sometimes, most remarkably, the effect is felt by those with dissonant political beliefs. Both Quindlen and Sorkin, through their storytelling, show that they possess the ability to establish a personal connection and inspire a political impact, intangible and unquantifiable as those may be, but nevertheless something felt and acknowledged and sought after by their audiences.

What do these observations reveal about how a storyteller can have a large and lasting impact on an audience and possibly even the political landscape? Is the revelation that one can have more impact on culture and politics specifically as a storyteller than as a politician or even as a professional political communicator? Perhaps these considerations are one of the reasons Quindlen left her job as a political columnist at the nation's most respected newspaper in order to write novels; or why *The West Wing's* political consultants, who included a number of former White House staffers, valued their

⁷⁰⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archive of Lesbian Feeling," *An Archive of Feelings* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 262

⁷⁰⁸ Cvetkovich, 254

⁷⁰⁹ Taylor, 21

role on the show educating millions of Americans with their contributions; or why professional political communicators working at the highest levels in Washington, D.C. continue to leave prestigious roles to pursue screenwriting careers in Hollywood.⁷¹⁰

To “Do Good By Stealth”

The fact that Sorkin and Quindlen reach broad populations in a way that politicians could only dream about, shaping values and influencing perspectives, is the reason that this project is not focused on storytelling *within* political communication. It is not concerned with telling stories through political speeches or political advertising or any of the myriad ways that political practitioners co-opt storytelling to influence and inspire their constituencies. This project is about storytelling that deals with political subject matter and the ways in which public figures like Quindlen and Sorkin, who write from a position outside the realm of political practitioners, are able to influence those very same constituencies through their storytelling.

Therefore the focus of this dissertation is on the experience of reading and viewing the work of these two storytellers; to interrogate how it feels to be moved by them in all the ways their audiences feel moved and what the significance of those feelings are. In the view of this scholar, the significance is that the promise of experiencing high-quality storytelling is enough to inspire audience members with differing political beliefs to seek out political messages from storytellers with whom they seemingly disagree. They voluntarily seek out these storytellers and expose themselves

⁷¹⁰ Jason Horowitz, “Jon Lovett’s Written for the President, But Will That Get Him to Hollywood?,” *Washington Post*, September 2, 2011. Accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jon-lovetts-written-for-the-president-but-will-that-get-him-to-hollywood/2011/08/22/gIQAhZmIkJ_story.html.

to the storyteller's dissonant perspectives. What could possibly enable this type of activity other than humanity's desire for a story well-told? What, other than humanity's love of story and its craving to be taught through story, moved by story, and shaped by story?

It seems, then, that the technique of satisfying an audience's expectations – which creates a positive storytelling experience for one's audience – and the narrative strategies that enable its execution are of paramount importance to political storytellers who wish to attract a politically diverse audience. Once the readers or viewers have presented themselves and, in the case of serial formats such as political columns and television series, make the effort to return regularly, the storyteller can rely on the narrative strategies discussed throughout the previous chapters to target and shape the cultural values of the audience.

In other words, what a talent for telling stories grants a storyteller is access. The concept of access was mentioned in both case studies, and each time 19th century writer and abolitionist Harriet Farley was quoted as saying, "To convince people, we must gain access to them." Skilled storytellers gain access. Farley's interest in access was for activist ends, her mantra being to "do good by stealth."⁷¹¹ Doing good by stealth is precisely what Quindlen and Sorkin accomplish as they use their storytelling to promote progressive cultural values on a mass scale, offering liberal perspectives to broad audiences on political topics including gun control, birth control and abortion, immigration, end of life care, religious freedom, gay rights, gender and racial equality, and so on. Perhaps a more politically conservative scholar would not see the type of messaging that Quindlen and Sorkin are propagating as "good," but the position of this

⁷¹¹ Douglas, 71

scholar is that the evolution of a culture toward a more fair and equitable system of beliefs and behaviors is progressive and denotes progress, and should be viewed positively.⁷¹²

Do Quindlen and Sorkin change opinions with their writing? Almost assuredly, at least a few. Do they change opinions on such a scale as to alter the course of political history in America? Impossible to say, but less likely. They do, however, specifically alter the lives of individuals, whether by inspiring actual policy outcomes (such as Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney's move to protect Governor's Island using the Antiquities Act) or providing a way forward in one's personal life (in the instance of those who used Quindlen's column to come out to their parents or deal with the death of a loved one). The examples of Quindlen and Sorkin demonstrate that talented storytellers possess a skill that is tremendously powerful and worthy of academic investigation: the ability to make mundane political issues and liberal political perspectives palatable to a wide variety of people who would otherwise have turned the page or turned the channel.

⁷¹² Many cultural theorists, including Raymond Williams, believe that the greater arc of a culture is toward improvement. A society may never reach a state of perfection, but it will get closer to it. Values broaden and embolden, are applied more evenly and generally, and are lived more consistently and genuinely. But also the values themselves can change and improve, not only the embodiment of them by humans. A culture can become more ethical, more innovative, and more prosperous. Williams sees this progress, or "common growth," as evident in a society's sectors such as medicine, production, communication, ethics and art forms. See Williams, "The Analysis of Culture," 49

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The “Ought” of American Studies Scholarship

In his canonical work, “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” Gene Wise describes the beginning of the American Studies movement by comparing it to the birth of America as a nation, and the idea of America that early settlers adopted. He writes, “both have articulated visions of a new and better order,” and that the corresponding “insecurity of identifying with an *ought* rather than an *is* has compelled each to continue asking, ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Where are we heading?’”⁷¹³ In other words, American Studies scholars often feel like they are working *toward* something or *for* something.⁷¹⁴

American Studies places a continual emphasis on the greater question of, “What is the point of the scholarship one studies and generates?” Though theory does not require an activist end, and theory for the sake of theory can open new doors and push scholarship in new directions, Angela McRobbie warns of losing “a sense of why the object of study is constituted as the object of study in the first place.” The discipline’s very nature enables it to move beyond the academy.

In the wake of the nascent field’s earliest paradigm, the myth-symbol school, American Studies students would turn to “earthier matters,” activism, and fieldwork in their embrace of the everyday.⁷¹⁵ The civil rights era of the 1960s provided an emphasis on radical action and the academy’s reach beyond its own school walls. Not only did scholars want their work to matter beyond the academy, but they began to incorporate life

⁷¹³ Wise, 166-7

⁷¹⁴ Parts of this section were augmented from Ashley Glacel, “AMST 601 Final Paper.” University of Maryland, 2009.

⁷¹⁵ Wise, 187

beyond the academy into their work as an object of study. Ethnography became more popular in the 1970s, including the appreciation that, as Clifford Geertz said, “small facts speak to large issues...because they are made to.”⁷¹⁶

In the decades after its formation, American Studies developed a reflexivity and an introspective tension that pushes scholars to question its past, its focus, its inclusiveness, its boundaries, its tools, and its direction. This reflexivity pushes for an answer to the important question, “What is the point? Who is it for?”⁷¹⁷ For many American Studies projects, the point is activism. It is not surprising that the desire for theory to translate into and correspond with activism is strong amongst scholars in a field centered on cultural studies and heavily interested in identity studies. These subjects are almost always political in nature, and therefore conjure up questions of whatever hegemonic forces might be at play. It logically follows that once the forces are identified, the scholar’s next question will be, “How can I use what I have learned to challenge them?”

Several of the theoretical schools from which American Studies scholars draw offer meaningful perspectives on materialism and activism. Marxists and the Frankfurt school dealt with the material in terms of capital, worker’s conditions, and consumerism. Antonio Gramsci went further, asserting that one’s material existence is more than just one’s labor – it is also the culture in which humans live and the ideology in which humans believe. Like Marx, however, Gramsci also contends that activist ends are a necessary component of intellectual work, and that cultural analysis and theorizing cannot be the only aim, but must justify itself through the will to take action based on its

⁷¹⁶ Geertz, 23

⁷¹⁷ Angela McRobbie, “Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies,” in Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

discoveries.⁷¹⁸ He wrote extensively on the role of the intellectual in society, whose duty is to enable a material effect by laying the groundwork for a fresh, innovative worldview – in other words, someone who can work toward the subversion of hegemony.⁷¹⁹ The belief that intellectuals can originate from outside the academy is one that has only gained more prominence in American Studies scholarship.

The Activist Possibilities of This Scholarship

Taking the preceding into account, what might the next steps of this scholarship be? In terms of scholarly pursuits, one could expand upon this dissertation by further exploring the use of the material both as an inspiration for and a goal of theorizing, persuasive storytelling as a strategy for translating and packaging theory so that it can be most effective, how essential storytelling as a skill is to performing the work of a public intellectual, and the advantages of coupling theory with action. One could also build on the subject of the public intellectual's role and even perhaps responsibility in confronting hegemonic forces.

In terms of activist ends, though, how could one activate the knowledge produced and analysis undertaken by this dissertation? Might it help public intellectuals capitalize on storytelling more effectively in pursuit of political and material ends? Can a deeper understanding of storytelling's potential to influence its audiences benefit activists in their efforts to lead social change movements and subvert oppressive aspects of the status quo? Influencing audiences could mean anything from convincing readers to vote a

⁷¹⁸ Gramsci, *Historic Bloc*, 209

⁷¹⁹ Gramsci, Antonio, "The Intellectuals and Education" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 1929-35*, 9

certain way, support a certain social issue, volunteer or give money to a particular cause, or other kinds of political engagement.

Specifically, aspects of this dissertation could be applied within the realm of professional political communications and journalistic work. Excerpts could be made available and disseminated in a variety of ways: to those offering leadership and communication training to political activists, to media consultants working with politicians and their staff, to entertainment writers seeking to have a social impact on their audiences, and of course to professors teaching on related subjects nationwide. Significant points of the dissertation could take the form of training materials, while parts or all of the dissertation could be marketed for publication as a mainstream book for those interested in improving their political communication and persuasion skills.

The value of this dissertation lies within its contention that if a person has the ability to artfully and strategically tell an entertaining and satisfying story, one with a powerful message, then he or she can command an audience that will return again and again to voluntarily experience stories anew, therefore multiplying the opportunities a public intellectual has to be influential. By delving deeply into the strategies and successes of Quindlen and Sorkin, this dissertation offers a study in the structure of a good story, demonstrates how one can set and meet audience expectations, and provides many examples of how a political point is made palatable through its presentation within a story. It demonstrates how when the “journey” of the story is at an end and the audience feels a satisfaction and fulfillment that only the proper narrative structure can provide, the most effective and influential storytelling taps into targeted cultural values in order to change minds and even, perhaps, change behavior. It is hoped that the

arguments of the preceding dissertation has the potential to better enable public intellectuals to achieve political change and activist ends.

Appendix A: Selection of Anna Quindlen's Political Columns

- Quindlen, Anna, "A Bit of Advice: Don't Go There!" *Newsweek* 13 Feb. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A Good Girl, A Great Woman." *Newsweek* 30 Jul. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A Leap Into the Possible." *Newsweek* 9 Aug. 2004. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A New Kind Of Poverty." *Newsweek* 1 Dec. 2003. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A New Look, An Old Battle." *Newsweek* 8 Apr. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A New Roof on an Old House." *Newsweek* 5 Jun. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "American Forgetting." *Newsweek* 17 Sept. 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "A Shock to The System." *Newsweek* 25 Aug. 2003. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Becoming A Secret Santa." *Newsweek* 16 Dec. 2002. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Book Leads to Teacher's Suspension." *Newsweek* 12 Jul. 2008. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Certain About the Unknown." *Newsweek* 11 Oct. 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Desecration? Dedication!" *Newsweek* 23 Feb. 2004. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Duty? Maybe It's Really Self-Help." *Newsweek* 7 May 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Everything Is Under Control." *Newsweek* 8 Oct. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Flown Away, Left Behind." *Newsweek* 12 Jan. 2004. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Freedom's Just Another Word." *Newsweek* 18 Oct. 2004. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "From Coffee Cup to Court." *Newsweek* 29 Apr. 2002. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Gossip in the Age of Anna Nicole." *Newsweek* 5 Mar. 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Home Cooking." *Newsweek* 23 Feb. 2008. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "How An Old Dog Teaches Me Tricks About Life." *Newsweek* 16 April 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "How Much Jail Time for Women Who Have Abortions?" *Newsweek* 6

Aug. 2007. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "I'll Never Stop Saying Maria." *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 2004. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "In a Peaceful Frame of Mind." *Newsweek* 4 Feb. 2002. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "In Search of a Grown-Up." *Newsweek* 26 Aug. 2002. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Journalism 101: Human Nature." *Newsweek* 15 Nov. 1999. Print.;

Quindlen, Anna, "Life Begins at Conversation." *Newsweek* 28 Nov. 2004. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Live Alone And Like It." *Newsweek* 7 Aug. 2006. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Imagining The Hanson Family." *Newsweek* 24 Sept. 2001. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Mary Todd Lincoln's Other Story." *Newsweek* 21 Feb. 2009. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Mortal Kombat, Election Level." *Newsweek* 4 Oct. 2004. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "No Privilege for Parents." *Newsweek* 16 Jan. 2000. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Not A Womb in the House." *Newsweek* 16 Nov. 2003. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Now It's Time for Generation Next." *Newsweek* 1 Jan. 2000. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "One Day, Now Broken in Two." *Newsweek* 9 Sep. 2002. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Outside the Bright Lines." *Newsweek* 10 Aug. 2003. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Overhearing the Agenda." *Newsweek* 11 Nov. 2006. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Personality, Not Policy." *Newsweek* 21 Jun. 2004. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Playing God on No Sleep." *Newsweek* 2 Jul. 2001. Print.

Quindlen, Anna, "Political Pundits Must Rise Up." *Newsweek* 19 Mar. 2007. Print.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/28/opinion/public-private-the-power-of-one.html>.
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- Quindlen, Anna, "RU-486 Keeps Abortion Private." *Newsweek* 6 Feb. 2009. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "School's Out for Summer." *Newsweek* 18 Jun. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Singing Praise to the Crazy." *Newsweek* 29 Jan. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Sound and Fury, Signifying Zip." *Newsweek* 10 Oct. 1999. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Staring Across a Great Divide." *Newsweek* 1 Jul. 2002. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Stepping Aside." *Newsweek* 2 May 2009. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Still Stuck in Second." *Newsweek* 8 Mar. 2008. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Still the Brightest." *Newsweek* 14 May. 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Summertime Blues." *Newsweek* 28 Jun. 2008. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Call From the Governor." *Newsweek* 19 Jun. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Clinic: A No-Spin Zone." *Newsweek* 16 Oct. 2006. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The End of Apathy." *Newsweek* 12 Jan. 2008. Print.;
- Quindlen, Anna, "The End of the Janus Presidency." *Newsweek* 4 Dec. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Great Obligation." *Newsweek* 19 Apr. 2004. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Harsh Nurse and Her Lessons." *Newsweek* 22 Oct. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Inalienable Right to Whine." *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 1999. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Problem of the Color Line." *Newsweek* 13 Mar. 2000. Print.

- Quindlen, Anna, "The Reasonable Woman Standard." *Newsweek* 27 Mar. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Terrorists Here At Home." *Newsweek* 17 Dec. 2001. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "The Time Machine." *Newsweek* 25 Dec. 2006. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "We Are Here For Andrea." *Newsweek* 22 Sept. 2003. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Weren't We All So Young Then?" *Newsweek* 31 Dec. 2001. Print
- Quindlen, Anna, "We're Missing Some Senators." *Newsweek* 21 Mar. 2005. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "We're Off to See the Wizard." *Newsweek* 28 Feb. 2000. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "We've Been Here Before." *Newsweek* 31 Oct. 2005. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Why Do We Pretend Parenting is Easy?" *Newsweek* 18 Apr. 2009.
Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Why Even Try the Imitation?" *Newsweek* 28 Jul. 2003. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Why Stuff is Not Salvation." *Newsweek* 13 Dec. 2008. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Write for Your Life." *Newsweek* 22 Jan. 2007. Print.
- Quindlen, Anna, "Young in a Year of Fear." *Newsweek* 4 Nov. 2002. Print.

Appendix B: Selection of *The West Wing* Episodes and Seasons

- “20 Hours in L.A.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “A Proportional Response.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Marc Buckland. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Celestial Navigation.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Dee Dee Myers & Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. (Story). Dir. Christopher Misiano. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Enemies.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Ron Osborn & Jeff Reno (teleplay) and Rick Cleveland, Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. & Patrick Cadell (Story). Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Five Votes Down.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. & Patrick Cadell (Story). Dir. Alan Taylor. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “He Shall, from Time to Time...” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Arlene Sanford. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “In Excelsis Deo.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Rick Cleveland. Dir. Alex Graves. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay), Peter Parnell and Patrick Caddell (story). Dir. Laura Innes. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Don Scardino. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Lord John Marbury.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin & Patrick Caddell (teleplay), Patrick Caddell & Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. (story). Dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Mandatory Minimums.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Robert Berlinger. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Mr. Willis of Ohio.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Christopher Misiano. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Pilot.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

- “Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Six Meetings Before Lunch.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Clark Johnson. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Somebody’s Going to Emergency, Somebody’s Going to Jail.” *The West Wing: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Paul Redford & Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Jessica Yu. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Take Out the Trash Day.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Ken Olin. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “Take This Sabbath Day.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay), Lawrence O’Donnell, Jr. & Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin (story). Dir. Thomas Schlamme. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “The Crackpots and These Women.” *The West Wing: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin. Dir. Anthony Drazan. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- “The Fall’s Gonna Kill You.” *The West Wing: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Aaron Sorkin (teleplay) and Patrick Caddell (story). Dir. Christopher Misiano. Warner Brothers, 2004. DVD.
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